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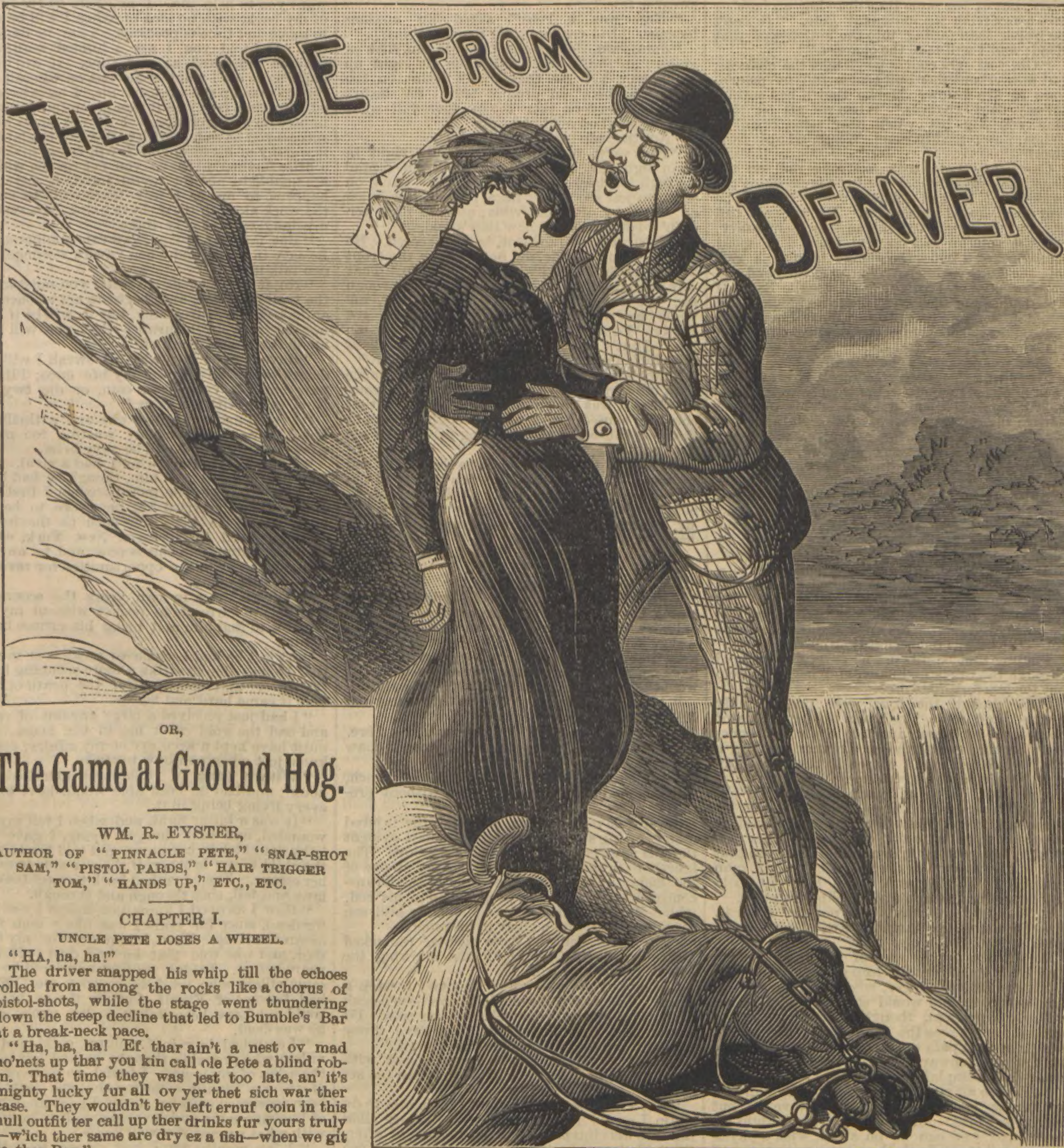
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OR,

The Game at Ground Hog.

WM. R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "PINNACLE PETE," "SNAP-SHOT
SAM," "PISTOL PARDS," "HAIR TRIGGER
TOM," "HANDS UP," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

UNCLE PETE LOSES A WHEEL.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The driver snapped his whip till the echoes rolled from among the rocks like a chorus of pistol-shots, while the stage went thundering down the steep decline that led to Bumble's Bar at a break-neck pace.

"Ha, ha, ha! Ef thar ain't a nest ov mad ho'nets up thar you kin call ole Pete a blind robin. That time they was jest too late, an' it's mighty lucky fur all ov yer thet sich war ther case. They wouldn't hev left ernuf coin in this hull outfit ter call up ther drinks fur yours truly—w'ich ther same are dry ez a fish—when we git to ther Bar."

"But what do you really mean?" said the passenger, who sat just behind the driver, some con-

"AW, WEALLY, DOANCHAW KNOW! IT'S THE MOST WEMAWKABLE ADVENTURE I'VE HAD SINCE I LEFT DENVAH."

cern in his tone. "For Heaven's sake put on your brakes. You will have us all over into the gorge."

"Never you mind. I'm a-drivin' this yere stage, an' I ain't a-puttin' ther hearse over ther drink ez fur ez I'm aware ov it. Jest turn yer eyes back'ard an' see ef yer can't ketch a glimps' ov severial gerloots with guns, a-lookin' down this yere way, an' tryin' ter make up their minds ef they kin down a leader afore I gits to ther turn. Ef they does that same, ef Pete can't take to ther bresh he'll be cold meat, an' don't you furgit it. Cuss 'em! They're too willin' ter plug a driver, anyhow!"

The passenger looked backward, as requested; and saw that old Pete had told no more than the truth. At the top of the hill he could see several heads, and what seemed to be the barrels of as many rifles.

The glimpse was sufficient. Without waiting to see what they were going to do he flung himself forward, and down behind the driver.

As the stage gave an extra lurch at that moment the two narrowly escaped going overboard together, and Pete's jollity was brought to a sudden period.

"Blame your eyes! What yer tryin' ter do? Ef ther brakes hed 'a' bin down we would 'a' bin over."

"Whip them up, whip them up! Don't pull in. It's I they are after!"

"They don't need no whippin' now, blast yer! They're goin' fur all that's out. Ef yer keeps an eye down ther hill you'll see ther gates ov glory openin' wide! Ther infernal beasts is a-runnin' away!"

"Let them run!" grunted the passenger, cuddling down so as to more effectively screen his body, but at the same time drawing an inch or two away from the indignant Pete. "It can't be worse than falling into the clutches of that fiend; and I will take the chances."

"Oh, yes! Ov course you'll take the chances; but how erbout ther hull hearse full ov passengers ez are below? Mebbe they'll hev suthin' ter say 'bout 'chances.' When we git ter ther Bar you kin bet you'll hear some Spanish. Whoa, now! Stiddy thar! Whup, whup! Now then!"

Cautiously Pete took a strong pull on the reins, and steadily increased the pressure on the brake that he had thrown over. Perhaps he had exaggerated the danger. The animals had got out of hand; but it was only momentary, and the veteran had no real fear. The speed was checked a trifle, the plunge became a gallop, the stage swung safely around the bend and entered on the straight road to the Bar. If Pete had been called on to make an affidavit he could have offered as his sworn testimony that he would get safely into the Bar, on time, and his team hard held.

That was just where he was off.

There was an unexpected lurch, a crash, and then a general wreck. Pete went over the foot-board, landing upon the top of his plunging horses: the passenger who, to a certain extent, was responsible for the calamity, was flung head-foremost to the side of the road, while from an invisible quartette inside of the shattered coach arose a chorus of wild yells.

A fifth insider turned a little white at the jolt when the wheel first went off, but, after that, uttered no sound, curling himself up on the middle seat, which he had been enjoying, all by himself, and holding on with might and main, until the shivered body of the coach came to a halt, so sudden and long-continued that it was certain the worst was over.

Then the young man shook himself as well as he could, and felt of his arms and legs to make sure that he was not seriously injured.

Finding that he was not he carefully emerged through the broken window, and began to help out the less fortunate ones.

Still, though the four were pretty badly bruised, and some blood was flowing, none of them was senseless, and no important bones were broken, so that the good Samaritan had a chance to look around to see if there was any one else needing his assistance.

Pete had, as usual, escaped altogether unharmed, and had nothing to do but hold his horses and be profane. By far the most serious case seemed to be that of the one outrider passenger, who was lying in a sprawling heap that was suggestive of a corpse. The young man hastened to his side, and raised his wrist, looking keenly in the face while feeling his pulse.

"Not dead yet, aw, but not far from it. There's something familiar, aw, about him; I wish he would open his eyes."

As if in answer the eyes of the man opened; and his lips also, with a deep groan.

This outside passenger, who had been so fearful that the agents would stop him, was rather a fine looking man, though somewhat coarsely dressed; and to see the complainant manner in which he bore pain one would think twice before calling him a coward. After that one groan he uttered no complaint.

"Yaw're all right," said the young man in a reassuring tone. "Pretty badly stove up, but might be worse. Fawtunately we are right in town, and yaw can be on a bed, with a physician to tell yaw what's the matter in naw time."

The young man was deliberate; so deliberate that the other had time to look him over with a closer scrutiny.

"Are you not—La Roy Morton?"

"My handle exactly, old chappie; and—no! yes! It cawn't be! It is—Horton Graunt. I haven't forgotten, and—aw—I'll do my bwest foah yaw now. Yaw saved my life once; by Jawve I'll try an' weturn the compliment as fah as I can."

In the midst of the pain the white lips curled in a faint smile.

"As—ridiculous as—ever! Do your best. Watch me—night and day. If you save me—I won't forget it."

The few words were exhaustive. Horton Graunt would have fallen back if Morton had not been supporting his head.

"A minute, please. I'll—aw—have some one to carry yaw to the hotel, and I won't leave yaw."

The accident took place just within the environs of Bumble's Bar, which was quite a brisk little mining-town. By this time there were a dozen men around, and more coming, so that it was not hard to form the procession.

First came four men carrying the injured Graunt, with Morton as chief marshal. After them stalked the other passengers. In the rear Pete and his horses followed, sedately enough now that the danger and damage were over. Their place would have been in the advance if the drive, had not stopped to explain the situation to some inquiring friends.

"Too cussed bad, arter shakin' the Hairpins—an' all along on that gerloot ez looks to hev had his last sickness. I don't want to cuss him too bad, considerin'; but angels couldn't help to swear a few."

"How was it, Pete?" asked an anxious listener. "Did yer jam inter ther Hairpins?"

"Jam, ram, slam right through 'em, slick ez grease; an' that's what makes me git right up ter howl. Yer see they didn't count on the ole hearse bein' on prompt time, an' hedn't got inter posish on ther top ov ther hill whar they figgered on holdin' us up."

"Not ther top ov that hill, Pete?"

"That very, blessed, identical hill, right in plain sight ov Bumble's. I seen 'em comin' through the bushes, an' knowed their game on sight, so jest shook ther lines, let out the links, an' went by 'em like whiz; an' me nigh ter dyin' a-laffin' to think how they's sold."

"Then, this hyar gerloot, he got skeered. He war sittin' up outside, an' he dove fur the front boot when he know'd what was goin' on. That war all right ef he hadn't tried ter dive through me. He come nigh ter chuckin' me off, an' while we war a-strugglin' ther animile got erway. I got 'em in hand ag'in; but it was too late. That's ther bull story; an' it's him thet's suffrin'. I'm blamed sorry; but so he orter."

Pete's story was not exactly in accordance with the facts, since he suppressed the information that it was the running off of a wheel that actually caused the wreck, though no doubt that was caused by the headlong race down the mountain-side.

Anyhow it was near enough to the truth; and as there were no variations when he retold the yarn some half-dozen times at the Transcontinental Hotel it was universally accepted, and Mr. Horton Graunt got less sympathy than he deserved.

CHAPTER II.

A HUNTED MAN.

THE doctor, who was speedily called in to examine the injured man, pronounced the case quite a serious one. There was shock and concussion, with fears of internal injury. He would most likely pull through, but he would have to have good nursing and exercise patience. It would take time to set him on his feet again.

"All right, chappie. Yaw take the time and I'll take the patience," drawled Morton.

"It's fawchunate I happen taw be here. Weal nice it is to pay your debts, doan't chaw know?"

Graunt smiled faintly. He did not say much, and accepted his friend's attention without protest.

Several days of nursing followed, the injured man growing stronger though it seemed evident that his recovery would be tediously slow. The fourth evening the two were sitting in one of the cuddly holes called bedrooms at the Transcontinental, Graunt was propped up in his bed, while Morton lounged in a chair, his heel on the window-sill and a cigar in his mouth.

"Very bold fellows, these agents," remarked Morton, removing his cigar and allowing the smoke to curl upward.

"Wight at the vewy Bar they twy to stop a stage. Wondaw if it wouldn't have been bettah to have held up and handed ovah our coin. I'd soonah lose a thumpin' pile than have thwee wibs broken and all my legs out of joint."

Graunt gave shudder, as he answered with more strength than he had shown since the accident:

"No, a thousand times no! If it was to do again I would risk all, and more, sooner than fall into his clutches. It was I they were after. Oh, he is Satan, I tell you. One day I will not flee

from him, but the time of reckoning has not come yet. I must first find my darling little Ethel and see that her future is provided for. After that he will not find me unwilling to meet him half-way."

"Hello, old man, what's the meaning of all this? Who's aftaw yaw? And who's little Ethel? I don't want to be impwertinent but, aw, I smell a myst'y."

"No impertinence, my friend. After what you have done for me I would not think of keeping anything from you. Do you know that for years I have been a hunted man?"

"Weally! I would not have thought it."

"Yes; and I too, have been a hunter. It is only in the last few weeks that I have been the timid man that you find me—only since I began to believe that Ethel might be living."

"If she lives she is in danger; and there is one who would come right here into this camp and slay me where I lie, if he thought there was no other way to prevent my meeting her. After all the harm he has worked me his revenge would be incomplete if I found my child once more."

He spoke rapidly and fiercely. There was a wildness in his eyes, an agitation in his manner, that almost led his listener to believe that the fever had returned. In some concern he tried to calm the agitated man, who, after the outburst, eased himself back a little and lay gasping.

"Yes, yes," he said, at length, in a more collected manner. "I know it is bad for me, but I grow wild when I think of it. I have never told the story—for years, until it all came to me again like a flash, I did not know that I had one. I want to tell it to you, and if you can I want you to help me. I am here on the broad of my back, with no idea of when I will be able to move and time is precious. I am in danger, too. As I told you, I am a hunted man; and may be murdered at any time. If anything happens to me I want some one on whom I can rely to take up the work for me. I have accepted your time freely as it was given but I cannot impose on you any more. I do not know what success you have met with in life, but the laborer is worthy of his hire, and I will freely give you a little fortune to have you act for me while I am unable to act for myself; and, if anything happens to me, as I fear there will, to carry the work along until, if she is living, you restore my daughter to her heritage."

"But, my deah fwend, yaw can command me. Be easy in mind, and when yaw're stwonger we can talk it ovah."

"No, it will not do to wait; you must know the truth to-night, and begin to act at once. I am not wild, or dreaming, but I will be if I do not receive your assurance that you will help me in this that I speak of."

"Have it yawr own way. I sweah I will not desert yaw. Yaw saved my life once; I'll pay yaw back in yawr own coin, or die twying. Now, go on with the story."

"I could make it a long one and a thrilling, but I have been foolishly wasting too much strength already. I will be very brief."

"When I wooed my wife I had a rival. She had never cared for him, though he had been dangling after her for months when I first met her. When I married her he swore to be revenged; and he kept his oath to the letter. Where I lived in Northern New York, was a wilder country than this is now, and to an unscrupulous villain the opportunities for revenge were just as many."

"A dozen times in two years the scoundrel was able to harm me in pocket without my being able to find him and bring his crimes home to him."

"At last he had become so reckless or so rich that he was able to strike a more stunning blow than ever; and shortly after the death of my wife it came hard and heavy."

"I had just received a large amount of cash, and had the gold with me in the house. He must have kept a keen eye on my affairs; for he knew just when and how to strike."

"With a gang of ruffians he attacked the house; and had he been able would have killed every living being in it."

"It was a bitter fight, and when I felt myself wounded, and as I thought, dying, I gave my baby daughter to her nurse, and told her to take the child to my brother, if she was able to make her escape. Then I rushed back to meet the outlaws and fell, shot through and through."

"How I escaped I know not, unless I was left for dead, since for years I was like a man in a dreamless sleep. Then I inquired for my brother, and was told that he had died suddenly, years before. I think he was murdered by the same villain who tried to murder me. What had become of Ethel? Certain it was that she could not have been taken to her uncle, since he was dead."

"I searched in vain for nurse, child, and the villain who probably thought he had left me in the ashes of my home. I found no trace of any of them. Finally believing that the child had been consumed with her nurse, I gave up all hope of knowing more and devoted myself to business, with what success you well know."

"A few months ago I had reason to believe

that the villain still lived and had found me out.

"I did not care. Time had tempered my passion, and I was no longer mad to take the law in my own hands and mete out vengeance. I decided not to search for him, but to be on my guard against any attack, and if he came in my way to act as circumstances seemed to warrant.

"But a few weeks ago, I learned that my old nurse was living, and had with her a child who well might be my lost Ethel. It may be a mistake, but I lost no time. As soon as I could I set out for Ground Hog Gulch.

"The moment I struck the Western country I felt that I was a marked man. The villain is on my track. He has been waiting till my eyes could almost rest on my daughter; then he will try to slay me. And yet! He may not know of Ethel. It may be that he is simply following me and biding his time. While lying here I have been thinking that it would be a mistake to risk leading him to her. Better that you should go on and make cautious inquiries. If you find the child you can bring her to me. If anything happens to me I have made my will—and there is her mother's fortune that is all hers. Oh, it is no light thing I am asking of you; it may mean danger or death for you as well; yet I know that you are intelligent and fearless, and that if you undertake what I ask, you will succeed if success is possible. Can I count on you?"

"Every time, my dear Graunt. What was the name of the villain, aw! and what the name of your nurse?"

"Herman Knight was the man who wronged me. Of the woman I am not so certain, though her first name was Elsie. Perhaps I may be misled by my information, but I think her last name was Dupin."

"Vewy stwange!" ejaculated Morton. "I was on the way to Gwound Hog, and my twunk is probably theah now, in ca'h of Isaac Muldoon. I can look foah two women as well as one if yaw weally insist; but, ah, in such mat-tahs there's nawthing like doing yawr own work. Foah ten dollahs I'd insure yaw against all the Herman Knights in the universe. Yaw can west asshua'd that they were simon-pure road-agents, and nothing else, that were aftah the stage."

"You are young yet, and willing to take risks, but I understand only too well the meaning of what I see. Herman Knight has found me, and I know what that means. The moment I am able to travel I shall leave this secretly, and try to hide away until I hear from you. If I fail I shall contrive some way by which you will know my fate without running into the same danger. Remember, it is not for myself I fear; but for Ethel."

"And I say if any one has spotted yaw it is a gang of woad-agents."

"And for them you seem to have no fear."

"Not a bit, old chappie; my pockets are empty."

"Why didn't you say so sooner? I will fill them. If you are correct it will be all the better for me."

"Not a bit of it! I've worked my own way since I spent the last dime the old gentleman gave me and I'll keep on that platform if it takes a yeah. Now, yaw go to sleep while I digest it all and to-morrow I'll tel yaw what I think of it."

CHAPTER III.

SELKA SEES A STRANGER.

"My child, it makes little difference how you may look at it now; you have heard your destiny, and it will not be long coming. I would advise you to say nothing of what I have told you, but quietly think it over. Your good sense, then, will lead you gracefully to submit."

The speaker was Major Martle, the man of Ground Hog Gulch. He was a tall, handsome man, well dressed, and with a look on his face of one who generally had his own way.

The auditor was Selka Dupin, a young lady who had made her appearance for the first time at the Gulch, some two or three weeks before she is here introduced. She knew but few people then, though 'most any citizen would have recognized her as the niece of Jean Lafitte, proprietor of the Lane Eagle Saloon. More strictly speaking, they should have called her the great-niece, though he had been to her a very father from the night when, years before, his niece staggered into his cabin, and placing the child in his arms, fell fainting before the fire with the one word, "Selka," trembling on her lips.

Jean Lafitte was a keen-witted Canadian Frenchman, who had been a hunter, trapper and guide the greater part of his life, and troubled his relatives very little, though he managed to know considerable about them. He was certain then of what he had guessed before—that Elsie had been privately married to her cousin, Francois Dupin, in spite of church and family, when, several years before, she had disappeared from her father's house.

He was just as certain, now, that Francois had deserted her, and that, her father having

moved away from his old home, she had come to him in her dire distress.

So Jean, having already quarreled with his brother about the girl, took her in, treated her kindly, nursed her, asked no questions, and from that time on, however he might wonder, provided for the two. They had come with him to the West, and he had his ups and downs; but when Selka unexpectedly came to him from the mission school, where she had been for some time, he was one of the thriving men of the Gulch.

Major Martle knew Jean, and had even managed to speak to the young lady several times, but it was the surprise of her life when, meeting him as she skurried along the trail on the back of her half-broken pony, he stopped her, and after some brief introductory conversation, asked her to marry him.

He laughed—not altogether pleasantly—at her indignant refusal; and then spoke as quoted.

"Never! You must be mad. You are almost a perfect stranger; besides being old enough to be my father. I may be the niece of only Jean Lafitte, and you may be the wealthiest man at the Gulch, but I cannot be frightened or forced; and when I am crowded too far, thank Heaven! I know how to protect myself. Out of the way, sir, or I will ride you down!"

The major had placed himself squarely in the middle of the trail, and the path was narrow. Had she known something of his strength of wrist on a bridle-rein, and the quickness with which he could gasp it, she might have been more dubious about her ability to carry the threat into effect.

Martle smiled this time. He looked up at Selka, and then down at the cayouse. He had already, in his time, lifted more than its dead weight with one hand.

"Don't be ridiculous," he murmured softly. "I might be compelled to carry you and your pony to a place where it would be more safe to indulge in equestrian antics. You observe the path is narrow, and on the off side there is a very ugly bank for a tumble. I would advise that you listen quietly to a few ideas that have just suggested themselves to me; and then you can depart, decently and in order."

"I did think that you might only be a crazy gentleman—I see you are a mad rough. For the last time, out of the way."

He stood as composed as ever. She raised her hand quickly, and, as she did so, his darted at her bridle-rein.

Major Martle was wise in most ways; but he never thought of a feint from her. The one hand went up; but it was not to strike. With her other hand she gave the rein a sharp wrench, and at the same time touched the animal's flank with her heel.

Rapidly as the major's grasp was made, the movements of pony and rider were more rapid still. His fingers just grazed the rein as the little forefeet rose in the air.

Instinctively he extended his grasp when the animal brushed past; but the girl anticipated him. With the skill of an Apache she crouched and hung over the pony's shoulder. When the major's fingers closed on air, Selka was beyond his reach, and he was staggering on the brink of the precipice of which he had warned her.

Above the sharp rattle of the little hoofs her laugh came floating back as she righted herself in the saddle.

"Ha, ha, Major Martle! The next time you come wooing, be not so sure. There are some things at the Gulch that you cannot have, and Selka Dupin is one of them!"

The major recovered himself with a quiet effort, and looked calmly after horse and rider.

"Just as well for you to think you take the first trick in the game. When the time comes for the real work, it will be all the easier to break you in. Always, provided"—he continued, looking after her with a glance as near to anxiety as he ever showed—"she don't get her neck broken now. That infernal pony is away with her, and means business. It's a mighty bad place at the ford. Pity I'm not mounted. I might have a chance to get in a little fine work."

He listened for an instant, and then strode away in the direction taken by the girl.

For the moment Selka thought only of escape, and urged her pony on, even though it needed no urging. When Major Martle had dropped away out of sight and hearing, she found that the little brute was entirely beyond control. He sped away like a whirlwind, and though Selka had no trouble in keeping her seat, that did not make the danger any the less. It was not present; but it was coming near, as she recognized with something like a shiver. She, too, thought of the danger at the "ford," which had floated across the mind of Major Martle.

She tried to turn the pony aside; but to tell the truth, the trail hardly admitted of that. Besides, he had the bit between his teeth, and had a mouth as hard as iron, anyhow. If he took the notion to go to destruction, he meant to go, and no girl should stop him by soft words, hard words, or by tugging at the reins.

"The ridiculous little beast!" she muttered. "If I was off and had hold of him, I could almost carry him on my shoulder. And here I

dare not jump off if I would; and if I stay on, there is more than a chance he will break my neck and his own along with it!"

The bank grew steeper at the side, as she descended, and a roll over its side would be no mean danger, but she had no great fear of the sure-footed animal making a stumble. It was where the trail turned abruptly and led across the stream that the catastrophe, if any, was to come. There the trail led right down to the very brink of a precipice over which the water tumbled, and then across the breast of this dam.

Could they make the turn at the speed they were going?

If not, one or both stood more than a fair chance to be launched out into space and fall fifty feet, to be mangled on the rocks below.

Though Selka asked herself the question as they sped along, and though the turn at the ford was frightfully near, she did not lose her courage.

She gave one last, steady pull at the reins, and seeing its utter uselessness, allowed them gradually to slacken until the pony had its head. Her face was a shade whiter than usual, and her breath came harder and faster; but, she kept firmly in her seat, leaning steadily toward the side that was opposite to the danger.

On they went. It was only a few paces to the turn, and still the pony's head was set straight as a dart for the crest of the wall of rock. He had made the turn at a walk scores of times; but just now in his madness, he had seemingly forgotten all about it. Half a dozen strides more, and Selka, if not throwing herself upon the spears of jagged rock that lined the trail, would go over.

Yet the little villain had no intention of breaking his neck, or that of his mistress. At the last moment his head turned, and he looked across the breastwork. Six feet further—and the brink of the precipice. It was not an inch too soon to turn, though he turned with the trail.

Selka had barely time for a wave of true thankfulness. Then—she was flying through the air. At the critical moment, he who never stumbled, stumbled, and as she left the saddle he came down heavily.

The shock was so severe that the pony actually plowed up the ground as he slid along. As for Selka—she gave herself up for lost and closed her eyes. Small blame to her too, if she uttered a slight scream as she felt a tremendous shock. Before there was time to utter another, she was standing on the ground, a foot or so from the precipice, with the arm of a strange young man around her.

"Aw, weally, doanchaw know! It's the most wemawable adventure I've had since I left Denvah."

CHAPTER IV.

OVER THE BRINK.

SELKA closed her eyes when the crash came. She thought she was being launched into eternity, and it was more of a shock to feel her feet on firm ground, and to hear that voice, than when she first realized that death was staring her in the face.

She stood trembling, yet fighting bravely to recover her strength, and she heard again, very much as if in a dream, that strange voice, whose owner seemed as much stupefied as herself.

"Weally, aw, this is wemawable. Don't, aw, lean on me too hawd, young lady. The, aw, shock has been stupenjus; and, aw, I feel weally exhausted. This way, please. Allow me, aw, to lead you. It's positively dangerous heah, doanchaw know."

The arm had already dropped from her waist, but Selka could feel the touch of a set of delicate fingers on her wrist, mildly drawing her away from what was even yet a dangerous proximity to the brink of the waterfall.

She opened her eyes at that, and, in spite of her late awful danger, came near opening them with a laugh. The voice was something different from anything she had ever heard, and the request not to lean too hard sounded so ludicrous that she forgot everything else in her curiosity to see what sort of being her preserver might be.

The first thing she saw checked the smile on her lips.

Almost at her feet lay her pony—dead. His neck had been broken by his fall, and he had died almost without a struggle.

She looked up at the trail down which she had come, and then over her shoulder at the rocky edge with the clear sky beyond it, before she suffered her glances to rest on the stranger. By the time she saw him she had forgotten his outlandish drawl, his quaint ways, his queer request, and was not even at once moved by his strange appearance. He was the man that had saved her life, and just then, was above all criticism.

"Ah," she said, taking his hand in hers, "without you I should have been lost. How can I even thank you?"

"Don't mentiyun it, please. It's of no consequence, doanchaw know! Caught yaw on the fly, I weally did, and I'm not much of a catch, either."

Having said that, he paused to laugh feebly, and then added:

"See the joke, aw? I'm a poor young man, doanchaw know. Not much of a catch, haw! haw!"

Before speaking again Selka completed her observation.

He was her exact contrast in every respect, tall, slender, dark, and a look of chronic wonder in his countenance.

Selka's acquaintance with the fashionable world had been rather limited. At the mission she had noticed costumes that were not often seen in a mining-camp, and she was prepared for almost anything in that direction. For that reason his garb scarcely struck her as being as outlandish as his manner; though there dawned on her a suspicion that his advent at the Gulch—if thither he was going—would be followed by a cry of, "shoot that hat!"

The laugh that began so boisterously died away in a feeble chuckle, and the young man stood waiting, it might be, for acknowledgment of his witty remark, though the vacant look on his face began to grow decidedly idiotic.

"I am afraid I am dull of comprehension," began Selka, slowly. "I thought I was thanking you for saving my life, but from what you say in reply perhaps I did not make my words entirely intelligible. I hope you can understand me when I say that I am truly grateful; and that my uncle, Jean Lafitte, will feel like being your friend, on my account. You may need him if you go into the Gulch in that garb, and speaking after that manner."

"Many thanks, Miss, aw, Miss Lafitte—"

"Dupin, if you please. We live, mother and I, with my uncle."

Miss, aw, Dupin! Thanks all the same. By some howid mischance I've dropped my cawd case; but the infoahmation cahb be impwahated wabally. I aw, am Le Roy H. Morton, late ov Denvah. Awbserve, you spell it with a lawge R. L-e-cawpital R-o-y—Le Roy. It's a vewy deestingway fawm'ly, and my baptismal sponsors, aw, would be hut if I, aw, did not keep the full facts befoah the people."

"Obliged for your confidence I am sure. As you seem inclined to frknkness it may not shock you if I ask what under the sun you are doing here? The Gulch is a terribly wicked place, and I have seen its toughs hang a man with a face not half as suspicious as yours. You have done me a good service; let me do you one in return. Turn around and go back. There are no possible prizes here that can compensate you for the risk you run."

"I am afwaid I cahb't take that all in at once, aw! Aw might say I am heah in search of fawtune—which seems, aw, a long way off. Actually, it looks as though I would have to work, if it don't come soon, aw!"

"And how else would you expect it to come, sir?"

"Oh, ah! Like the—ah—other fellows, doanchaw know? Flood and Rolston, and—ah—all the rest."

Mr. Morton was falling in Selka's esteem in an inverse ratio of progression. She looked at him in some scorn.

"I always understood that Flood and Mackay and 'the rest' were working men—and very hard-working men."

"Oh, ah! They worked foah day wages. Fortune didn't come in, aw, till they quit work, doan'tcher know! If a chappie shovels, aw, fwom mawning till night, what is the chance foah fortune to come in—see?"

"I see, sir, and am afraid you have come to the wrong place, if that is the plan you expect to prosper on. I must bid you good-day. I shall tell my uncle of the favor you have done me, and probably he will in some way be able to repay your kindness."

"Doan't mention it, please. If you could, howevah, diwect me to the domicile of one Muldoon—first name, Isaac—my unfortunate attention will, aw, be amply wepaid."

"That much I can do without any great effort. I think I would hardly trust you to follow my directions, but as his dug-out is only a few rods off, and I am going directly past it, I shall be happy to lead the way."

"Dug-out, aw? I gwopel! The language of this wogion is as wemarkable as all the west."

"Ike lives in a hole in the bank; we call it a dug-out, here. If you have never heard of such a thing, you might walk over it without seeing it."

"But, aw, they told me he kept a hotel. I—weally, aw, doan'tcher know—it would be unpleasant to live in a cellaw. Might as well be buried at once."

"A hotel! Oh, yes; I believe Ike has boarders, though I would sooner be somewhere else than asleep in his mansion when the winter rains come on. It does rain here, sometimes. There would be a very comfortable chance of being drowned before one knew there was anything the matter."

"Howid! Is—is—there any chance, aw, that it will wain now?"

He looked up anxiously at the sky, at the dam beside them—which was partly a work of nature, but had evidently been completed, or re-

paired, by the hand of man—and then at the gulch below and beyond.

"There is an occasional cloud-burst up in the mountains," responded Selka, laughing; "but, as for an honest rain—there is not much chance for one for the next two months. I have no doubt Ike will warn his boarders in time. I think just now I should be more apprehensive of an earthquake. I rather suspect that one is about in order. However, I doubt if it will come before the Gulch has disposed of you, so there is no need to caution you against sleeping on the top floor of a three-story brick house. Now, we must be going. Watch your footsteps a little. I don't know that there is much danger in the crossing on foot; but there is a chance for a ducking, which is unpleasant. Follow me."

Selka moved off toward the ford once more. It was possible to cross dry-shod by means of a combination of stepping-stones and logs, and it was done every day; but Morton looked rather ruefully at the young lady.

"Is it, aw, not possible to go around? It looks feahfully dangerous."

"Nonsense! Keep your eyes open and I will guide you."

Her gratitude was fast evaporating, and she was now looking at the young man more with an eye of disgust than of admiration. What had he done, anyhow? He laid no claim to anything but the negative virtue of having stood in the way; and even that seemed to have been against his will. She had been flung against him, and in saving her he had only tried to save himself from going over the precipice. In addition to being a fool he appeared to be a bit of a coward—and Selka did hate a coward.

"I, aw, am not suah that I see my way cleah to descend. Whah did you place your feet?"

She had sprung lightly down the bank, and was certain that even a fool could follow her. At his timorous cry she turned and held up her hand.

"Here. Let me lead you down. It would be a just reward for my gratitude if you were to break your neck on my hands."

"Gwaycious! I hope you won't do that. You make me shivah all ovah. How can one so chawming be so howidly bwutal about human life?"

Looking at him Selka saw him close his eyes, and she was positive that he turned pale. Then he made a blind rush, and came headlong down the bank, almost overthrowing her, though she managed to slide safely out of his way.

"Heavens, man! Are you bent on suicide? Ah, then! Take care! Help! Oh!"

Her cry of alarm changed into one of horror. Morton's floundering rush carried him to the left of the line of safety—perhaps trying to avoid her had something to do with it—and he found himself among the slippery rocks at the very verge of danger. He struggled wildly to keep his footing, shouted some undistinguishable words, fell with a splash, and then, head-foremost, vanished over the brink of the falls.

Selka did not doubt that he had gone to death; but in an instant was cool as ever. She dared not approach the spot she had last seen him, but from the bank above she knew she could command a view of the water below; and hastily reascended the bank. By chance looking up the trail she saw Major Martle standing just at the turn above, with folded arms, and she knew he had seen it all.

CHAPTER V.

THE GENTLEMAN AND SCHOLAR.

As Selka's eyes fell upon Major Martle the latter turned and strode away. Of course he could give no help, and yet, in the blaze of her excitement, she found time to notice his heartlessness, and make a mental note of it for future reference. Just now she was in too great haste to do more.

She reached the bank and cautiously approached the very spot where the young man had received her in his arms.

Had he been mangled by jutting rocks in his descent; or had he been crushed at the foot of the falls? Would she see his corpse floating below; or would the body never rise from among the eddies and whirlpools where it had sunk? She looked downward—and scarcely believed her eyes.

The young man was very much alive, and was floundering toward the opposite bank with more strength than grace; though there seemed little danger of his being drowned.

At the revulsion of feeling that came just then Selka felt completely unnerved. Indeed, she was more frightened at herself than at what she had seen and otherwise undergone. It was something new to her to lose her nerve.

Still, it did not take long to recover her self-possession. When she saw him scramble awkwardly up the low bank she darted down to the ford, and hastened across. No danger for her. She was too keen of sight and sure of foot.

On the other side the trail turned again, and went down the gulch.

In the middle of it stood Le Roy H. Morton, arms and legs stiff as pokers, the water streaming down from the tips of his fingers, and overflowing the tops of his boots. He looked like a

bursting reservoir, or a hen just out of a deep flood.

At sight of his woe-begone appearance the tension of Selka's nerves relaxed, and she burst into a ringing laugh.

"Laugh, aw, yaw heartless female!" he shouted, "but while yaw laugh I'll catch my death ov cold. My twunk is at Mistah Muldoon's. Lead me theah, quickly, or I'll pewish."

Indeed his teeth were chattering, and he shook like a man with the ague. On second thought Selka felt that he was little to blame for it, after going over the falls, with the chances to live through the trip a thousand to one against him.

"Here, take my hand, and run for it. I can have you there in a minute."

She caught his hand, gave him a jerk, and started off at a brisk pace, half-leading, half-dragging the luckless young man.

It was more than a minute; but not very much more, when she halted suddenly, with the exclamation:

"Here you are! And here is Mr. Muldoon. Ho, Isaac! here's a boarder for you! Nurse him up tenderly, for he's a friend of mine, if he is a fool. And a lucky man, to boot. He saved my life, Isaac, and then tumbled over the falls and scrambled to shore without even a bruise. Uncle will see him later, and you be sure that he gives a good account of your treatment. If he don't—I'll never bring you another lodger."

"Be the powers!" began Ike; but Selka did not wait to hear what he was going to say, hurrying along the trail in the direction of the camp just beyond.

"An' phwat kind av a creature be yez, anyways? Sure, an' yez look loike the lather ind av a harrud winther—all broke up."

Ike Muldoon came toward the new arrival with a look of curiosity on his face.

Le Roy Morton answered the Irishman's question by asking another.

"Aw, is Cholly Sands a wesident ov your domicile?"

"Is it Charley Sands yez are afther sp'akin' about? Sure, an' he's comin' now, an's almost forninst yez. Use yer ois more an' yer mouth less."

"Oh! Cholly it is," said Morton, turning, and stretching out his hand. "Me deah boy, doan't chaw wemembah Le Roy H. Morton, and the high old times at Denvah?"

Charley Sands was fair-haired, smooth-faced, with clear blue eyes, and of medium hight. The two men were a good deal alike in general appearance—or would have been had they been dressed in the same way, and if Sands had supplied the other with about half of his animation—in which case they would each have had enough and to spare.

At present the ostensible occupation of Mr. Sands was leading the orchestra at the Lane Eagle—a saloon run at high pressure by none other than Jean Lafitte. The musical band was but three strong, and had only been organized a couple of weeks; which last may account for the fact that none of the members had, as yet, died a violent death. But he looked as though, financially, he had about touched ow-water mark.

The face of Mr. Sands expressed considerable doubt, as he hesitatingly took the offered hand, and stared at the thoroughly soaked young man who claimed his acquaintance.

"I remember some high old times in Denver, and I have a faint recollection of a man by the name of Morton; but blame me, if I remember you. What you been a-doing?"

"I fell into the dwink, and if I wasn't ddowned it wasn't my fault. But don't, aw, say you don't wemembah me. Why, I sent my twunk heah, in your ca'h, and I thought you'd gweet me like a bwotah."

"It's your trunk, then, that Ike has been saying his prayers over, left-handed? Old man, I never threw off on a pard that pinned his faith to my coat-tails, but it's a bad time to try to tie to me. If Ike hadn't taken me in when I was all broke up, and nursed me through starvation and the mountain fever, I'd have been under the daisies. Get some dry clothes on you and then I'll talk at you. If you can pay your board a week in advance you may as well catch on at The Hole in the Wall. If you can't, you sha'n't wring in here. I've got a lively old wrestle to pay my own, till I get on my feet again."

"Sure, Mither Sands, a fri'nd av you's is wilcome," interposed Muldoon, who had been watching the two. "It's not much av a house, barrin' the name; but it's the risidence av a jontleman an' a scholar, whose doores are copin to indigent merit. If it's a visit he wants to make, let him come in."

Isaac waved his hand with a lordly motion, and added: "An' he'll foinde his troonk in the bist room."

"True for Isaac!" laughed Charley. "You'll understand the remark more fully, perhaps, when you get inside."

As there was but one room to the dug-out the trunk had hardly received any especial honor, but the fact of its being inside at all was a favor to its owner, who looked around the little cave-like apartment, with its sodded roof, and floor of beaten mud, and wondered whether there could possibly be room for another.

"I'm frightfully hawd up, Charley, but there's no weason why I shouldn't work—foah a little while, and this ought to last till I find a job."

He handed a ten-dollar gold piece to Muldoon as he spoke, and then knelt by the side of his trunk and extracted a suit of clothes much of a muchness with those he had on.

"And what in blazes do you expect to work at? You couldn't earn your salt in the mines. And if you're thinking about short cards—well, I would remark, there isn't a likelier place in all creation for a wandering stranger, that thinks he knows the pasteboards by name, to get his eye-teeth cut. I did—and I've been there before. And it takes stamps to get a start here at that."

"Aw, yes. But thab must be something besides ca'ds, and shovel? Yourself, aw? Music. I'm quite a pwoficient, and have an instrumment in my twunk. When I hea'd Cholly Sands was leading an orkwesta at Gwound Hog, I packed my violin, sent it by stage, and started on foot. All I want, aw, is a chance."

Sands rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"To put the truth flat-footed: if you didn't look so much like a blame fool you'd be just the chicken the Lame Eagle wants. Mamie can play an accompaniment to 'most anything; but Stein and I only play about half a dozen tunes, and the boys say it's getting monotonous. Can you play?"

"Anything an' ewevything."

"Blame me if we don't try it on, then. Good enough. I see the way through, if you're game to run the risk of losing the top of your head before you have a chance to begin. We'll have a rehearsal here this afternoon, and to-night we'll give them "Pete Jenkins's first vist to the circus," revised and adapted. By the way. What did you say your name was?"

"Morton. Le Roy Horton Morton. Don't chaw member?"

"Oh, yes. That's all nonsense. Jenkins—Pete Jenkins is what we'll call you. See that you do your level best. There's an' uncomfortable crowd about the saloon that will make it awfully warm for you if you're a guy. You believe in a hereafter?"

The last question was shot out suddenly, and with vicious energy.

"Why—aw—ov cawse I do."

"Then recollect that I'm going to put you on the brink of it to-night, and it will depend on yourself entirely whether or not you go over."

CHAPTER VI.

THE CONCERT AT THE LAME EAGLE.

THE LAME EAGLE was the somewhat strange name of the saloon kept by Jean Lafitte. Such a business was hardly in his line, but he had been spending, for him, a great deal of money on Selka's education, and it was "die dog or eat the hatchet." He had only opened the shebang as a make-shift, and had begun on a small scale, but he hit the popular taste, and it soon became a recognized institution, with the handsome profits increasing every day.

When Selka appeared before him one day and announced that she had come to the conclusion that she had exhausted the educational fount of the mission, and that to save further useless expense she had handed in her resignation and come to take care of him, the worthy Jean was momentarily in a peck of trouble, and would have sold out his business at a sacrifice. After the first shock was over, he decided he could keep her out of sight for a few weeks and then send her away to some higher priced institution until his profits would enable him to retire on a competency. He was not reckoning on Major Martie and several other contingencies.

The Eagle was a free-and-easy sort of bird; as exhibited by the little Frenchman. The farobank that was open there of an evening paid him a certain proportion of its winnings, and the tables at which poker, seven-up, vint-un or monte flourished, brought a certain recognized rental, so that he was on velvet all the time, and the potables paid a tremendous profit.

To keep a crowd was Lafitte's desire; and one of his methods was the orchestra, of which Charley Sands, who was a late arrival that had been cleaned out at his first sitting by the Ground Hog chiefs, was the leader.

The piano, which Lafitte had procured at considerable trouble and expense, before he went into the saloon business, in anticipation of a visit at vacation from Selka, furnished the idea. After finding "Dutch Mamie" the engagement of her brother, Herr Stein, who blew the trombone, and Charley Sands who professed to blow the cornet, and who offered himself for the situation on a hint from Ike Muldoon, naturally followed.

The orchestra, of which a too lavish use was not intended to be made, was an immense success at the start. All Ground Hog and its environs streamed in the first night, and was uproariously sympathetic through the whole programme, which extended over three hours, and averaged one selection to the thirty minutes.

As the entertainment was free, the same audience continued to come; but in the second week the discovery was made that the only al-

teration in the programme was in its arrangement.

At that Ground Hog prepared to kick, and Mr. Sands was watching closely for the last moment he could with safety retain his position. Of course, with his usual selfishness, he had decided that Ground Hog should not kick him.

It was Saturday when Le Roy Morton made his appearance at Ike Muldoon's dug-out.

That night the crowd at the Lame Eagle was larger than it had been since the Sunday previous, and every member of it was in a high state of expectancy. It had been quietly whispered—the best way to spread the news—that there would be a change of programme at last, and that a new performer would be introduced.

The introductory overture, however, was the same; and the following selections were all the old favorites.

It began to look very much like a sell when Charley Sands struck up "The Carnival of Venice" as a solo, and after hearing an accompaniment from the audience that was not down in the bills, he retired amidst a storm of ironical applause.

It was just then that Le Roy H. Morton sauntered into the saloon.

He came alone, and any one could tell by his face that he came in very good company. In costume and manner he was pretty much the same as when first introduced. His hair was plastered smooth by the use of soap and water, his hands were ornamented with a pair of lavender kid gloves, and under his arm he carried a slender cane. In a pause in the shouting and stamping he clapped his gloved hands together feebly, and squeaked:

"Well done, Cholly! Aw, well done!"

He might have escaped general attention if he had left that out; but the boys were ripe for mischief, and his words sounded like a challenge. In the opinion of the audience it was not well done, and they had tried to express their belief.

Bart Harrington, a rough and tough giant, was the nearest to the stranger, and the first to size him up.

Bart was a terror at his best, and this evening he was pretty nearly at his worst. He had dropped about all his available coin at poker, and was just full enough of benzine to be ugly.

"Why, you blamed little, dried-up, small-end ov nothin', whittled down to a fine point, what have you got ter do with it? Ground Hog has has just bin sayin' what she thinks, and I don't reckon they say it's well done, either. Who are you, and where did you come from, that yer goin' ter teach us how ter dance?"

"I assuah you, aw, that I had no thought of dawncing, my friend. I heard, aw, that this establishment furnished gwatooitus music, and, as I tell you fwankly, my finances not admitting of anything else, I came, aw, to heah it."

"That's cool, young man. Ef yer comes to ther Lame Eagle to hear music yer hev got ter be ready ter dance; an' ef yer dances, yer hev got ter be ready ter pay the piper. Ef I war you I'd sashay all hands up to ther bar afore ther trouble begins. Yer see, I'm lettin' yer down mighty easy."

"But, aw, gwacious! If I undahstand yaw—I cawn't. I gave my ten dollahs to Mistah Muldoon, and haven't enough to keep me in seegahs till I can make a stwike."

"I wonder ef ther anamile kin dance?" said Bart, looking around with more disgust than inquiry in his tones.

"Ef he don't, Bart, I reckon he'll hev ter do ther other thing, an' yer know w'ot that means," replied the first man upon whom his glance fell.

"Yes, stranger, ef yer won't drink er dance, I reckon you'll hev to fight."

"But, good gwacious, I can't fight either."

"You'd better make a healthy old try at it, then," responded Bart, advancing threateningly. "It's a shame ter kick a lam' like you, but suthin's got ter be did ter keep up ther credit ov ther camp. Ef it war knowed that we 'lowed w'ithless, one hoss shotes like you rampagerin' 'round we'd be jam full ov 'em in no time. It's half an hour till the next chune—plenty ov time ter lay you out, ready fur a fun'ral—an' ef they don't give us suthin' fresh we'll lay them two gerloots ez purtends ter blow brass 'longside ov you. Ain't it so, boys?"

"You kin smile," answered Bob Ridley, the man who had before spoken. "We've stood them figgers ez long ez we're goin' to, an' ef they can't j'ine in on suthin' else we'll fit 'em fur a wooden overcoat an' let Dutch Mamie go it alone. Hole on, thar! you've got it solid, an' ef yer don't dance fur ther crowd you kin settle with Bart."

Morton was not saying much just now, having seemingly awakened to the seriousness of the position; but while Ridley was talking he made an effort to quietly get out of the way, and was halted with a suddenness that showed how much in earnest Bob Ridley and his partner really were.

The young man, somewhat alarmed though he might be, did not take kindly to the interruption of his movements, and jerked away from the ungentle grasp with an unexpected haste.

In doing so he swung himself full into the arms of a third of the gang—Billy Rakestraw.

"Stiddy be jerks, thar!" shouted Billy, shoving him off with one hand, and banging his hat down over his eyes with the other.

"I'm a man ov peace, but I don't hev no tenderfeet stampin' over me—not ef ther court knows hisself. Whar yer goin' now?"

He had tumbled Morton over toward Bart Harrington, who caught him by the collar and swung him around so violently that his heels hit Bob Ridley a great deal harder than was agreeable, who, of course, went for the stranger.

From one to another the unlucky young man was hustled, the play becoming rougher as the excitement rose, and others took a hand in.

Perhaps if he had "begged" the gang might have let him off; but though his face expressed his concern he said nothing beyond an occasional "aw," followed by a grunt; until, by an extra vigorous hop, he had momentarily put himself out of harm's way.

Then he looked appealingly around and exclaimed:

"This is tewible! Is there no one to pwotect me?"

Unfortunately for Mr. Morton he had made his entrance at an unlucky moment.

The musicians had, as usual, retired after the effort of Charley Sands, so that the latter did not see what was going on.

Jean Lafitte was also temporarily absent.

He did not usually allow the play to become too rough at the Lame Eagle without taking a hand in himself, and so far had escaped having any general row and wreck in his saloon, though of course there had been the average amount of ordinary shooting affairs. But he had been called out for a few moments, and Johnny—the lightning tumbler-juggler and tip-top drink dispenser—was busy at the bar; while all this was going on in the corner at the opposite end of the room from the stage and bar.

The question almost saved Morton. It seemed so comical to the crowd that it was answered by a roar of laughter. If Bart Harrington had not been in a rank bad humor he might have laughed with the rest, and allowed the young man to escape.

"Not a livin' soul, sonny, so you kin say yer prayers an' git ready fur a gallop over the range."

As he spoke Bart seized him by the back of the neck, and forced him down on his knees.

"You kin begin, now. Say it quick, an' say it loud. 'Now I lay me—'"

"You unsanctified ruffian! what are you doing?"

The question came, quick and sharp, though in feminine tones, and a light, but firm grasp dropped on Bart Harrington's arm. He glanced up at the interruption, and met the scornful stare of a pair of cool black eyes.

"Do you understand, sir? This thing must be stopped. If you were a man you would not think of imposing on such a helpless creature. If there is no one else to protect him I will. Stand back, all of you!"

In the gloriously beautiful girl who faced them, nearly all of the crowd recognized the niece of Jean Lafitte, though this was the first time she had ever made her appearance in the saloon.

Bart Harrington was in a dilemma.

If he backed down before a girl the camp would have a very good chance to laugh at him; while, if he attempted to brave it out, and it came to anything like war, nine men out of ten would be against him.

In addition, Selka had her hand in the pocket of the loose jacket she wore; and from the way she talked the chances were that the hand held a derringer. Bart had a brutal courage of his own; but it was tempered with an openly acknowledged prudence. He never "kicked ag'in" the drop, but waited for the next chance.

Selka read all this in his eyes and smiled coldly.

"You are correct, my amiable hyena. In the language of yourself and set, I have you covered. And I never miss. If you can't live without business I'll try and occupy your attention till my uncle comes. This gentleman saved my life this afternoon and we are not going to see him suffer now."

Le Roy Morton had regained the perpendicular, and stood silent though anxious. He did not look much like a man who went about saving lives, but there was no mistaking Selka's earnestness. A cheer went up at her bold defiance.

"Ef I'd 'a' knowed, miss, that ther critter war good fur ary single thing on this byar blessed footstove," began Burt, "I'd 'a' let it slip; but ef he can't drink, dance er fight, what in blazes are he comin' inter ther Lame Eagle fur, puttin' on his blessed airs? Fresh! that ain't no name fur it. But a friend ov yours—in course he's got ther freedom ov ther shebang; but I wouldn't advise fur him ter go very fur alone, outdoors."

"Do you threaten him?"

Selka drew back and looked Bart all over.

"You really want it, then?" she continued, with a wicked little smile.

"Don't worry 'bout me, marm. When a lady talks, Bart Harrington caves right under. But

I'm dog-gone sorry ter see a lady like you makin' friends outer sich dog-goned poor material. Why, blame his eyes, he can't no nothin'."

"Weally, my good fellow, you've made a big mistake. I cawn't aw do just the things yaw cawn; but I cawn do plenty ov things yaw cawn't. I said, aw, well done, Cholly, because it was well done. I don't dwink or dance; but I cawn, aw, play the violin for those that do; and if the, aw, gentlemen would like I will show them."

Morton spoke with feverish earnestness, but his offer was greeted with a roar of applause—Miss Selka's *protege* bid fair to become a prime favorite, in spite of Bart and his friend.

"Bring out yer violin!" exclaimed one of the toughs, who but a moment before had been yelling his approbation of Harrington's amusement.

"A moment, gentlemen," said Selka, looking inquiringly at Morton.

"We have such an instrument here; and the young man shall have an opportunity. Come, sir, you must play from the stage; and I will accompany you myself."

She laid her hand lightly on Morton's arm and led him away, without a soul dissenting—in fact, the two were followed by a hearty cheer. They disappeared through the door leading into the little room to which the musicians always retired; but a moment later came on the stage amidst a storm of applause.

CHAPTER VII.

A CONTRACT FOR MULDOON.

AFTER all, the announcement by Selka that the young man had saved her life was what turned the tide in Morton's favor. She did not explain how it had been done, and as not a whisper had been breathed abroad of the occurrences, the circumstances remained a mystery to every one but Major Martle, Selka's uncle, and the inhabitants of Ike Muldoon's Hole in the Wall.

Somehow, no one thought of doubting the young lady's word. The balance of the world was mildly curious how the thing was done, and inclined to give the doer a show.

And still the applause was about as ironical as that before which Charley Sands had retired. In the eyes of the patrons of the Eagle, he looked too awkward to be "much good," though, if he had not some sort of knowledge of the violin, he would hardly have offered to attempt to amuse such a critical audience, after his late experience.

And the young lady must have some confidence in him, or she would not have been willing to assist.

So, in better humor than might have been expected, the crowd waited for what was to come.

Dutch Mamie and her brother had drifted to Ground Hog without any idea of turning their limited musical knowledge to any account.

The "professor" knew his own deficiencies as well as any one, but, like Charley Sands, he had no other refuge from starvation at the precise time when Jean Lafitte was willing to pay quite well for his services. Of the two, Mamie was the better performer, since she could manufacture a series of chords that would go with anything, and retained something of her old, average ability to read easy music, while he and Sands went it entirely by ear, and had considerable trouble in working up the half-dozen semblances of pieces that composed their repertory.

Miss Selka was different.

She nodded slightly to the audience, and seating herself at the piano, ran off an introductory overture, which was of itself a higher style of music than the patrons of the *Lame Eagle* had yet been treated to, but which was merely given to allow Mr. Morton time to get on playing terms with himself. Then the rattling chords died away into a little tinkling cadence, and the violin began to tell them all "Sounds from Home."

There are sweeter things, perhaps, but few that take closer hold. In half a dozen bars the musician had the audience with him, and in a dozen more he was forgotten altogether, and his music was everything. Some few furtively drew their sleeves over their eyes, and every one else clapped, stamped or shouted their delight, as the sounds ceased.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" exclaimed the voice of Sands, who appeared at the side-door. "For the benefit of the bar, there is generally an intermission between the selections. But to keep up the enthusiasm, Professor Salavator de Salverini will at once oblige you with the 'Last Rose of Summer,' and at the next intermission the price of drinks will be doubled. This house is run on business principles, and as the cost of this engagement is prodigious, every one must get the worth of his money."

Charley Sands had dropped the Pete Jenkins idea, and caught on to the other by a happy inspiration.

"A furriner! Bully fur him! This are a free country, an' ez long ez he kin scrape out sich chunes ez them, he kin stay in Ground Hog an' make his pile!"

This was the first audible criticism after the conclusion of Morton's second effort, and it was

generally concurred in. Of course, there were a good many who, at a moment's thought, would have pronounced the young man a dyed-in-the-wool American; but they did not think, and the idea that he was a foreigner accounted for so much, that it passed current generally. The era of good humor had reopened at the *Lame Eagle*, and though Selka retired with "The Last Rose," Morton, with occasional assistance from Dutch Mamie, kept the music going until a far later hour than usual. When the young man from Denver and Charley Sands started for the Muldoon dug-out, they had a good deal less expectation of finding danger in the way than they had hoped for when the evening began.

The absence of Sands at the critical period was explained by the fact that he had supposed Morton was outside, in waiting, and had gone out to convoy him in.

"You're all right now, old man; solid with the butt end of the camp, unless some of the big guns take a notion to buck against you. Bart Harrington and his pards may have it in for you—maybe you noticed they sloped early in the evening, and didn't show up again—but if the rest of the burg is going to show fair play, I guess I can see you through that rifle, if you can't take care of yourself. But who in blazes are you, anyhow? Blame me, if I ever saw you before in my life."

"Cholly, Cholly! If you hadn't given me a chance, I'd think, aw, yaw were twying to throw off on an old side pawd. Not wemember Le Roy H. Morton? Weally, it's too tewibly tewible!"

"Terrible goes, then. I'll swear I never saw you in Denver—not in any rig like that. If you'd open up your little game, perhaps I might be able to treat you more like a pard."

"But, aw, I have no little game; only, if I hadn't met yaw, I'd have stahved!"

"All right, play it out on that line, and I'll ask no more conundrums; but I thought it might be as well to have the same story if Ike began poking questions. He wasn't there to-night, that I saw, and I guess he's about dying to hear how it wound up."

Under ordinary circumstances it is quite likely that Muldoon would have been at least curious to know what sort of reception Le Roy Morton would meet with. He didn't know exactly what to make of him himself, and so the verdict of the Gulch would be doubly interesting.

The circumstances with Ike were, however, a little more than ordinary.

His boarders had departed, leaving him alone in the dug-out, and he was cleaning out his pots and pans, to be ready for the next day's culinary operations, when he heard footsteps just outside coming down the stone stairway, followed by a sharp rap at his door.

Muldoon's lantern was as good a one as there was in the district, so that he had plenty of light by which to recognize his visitor, and he turned his eyes toward the door in expectancy, as he shouted:

"Av ye'r white, kim in!"

The door opened sharply, and Major Martle entered.

"Ther top ov ther avening to yer Honor," exclaimed Ike. "Sure, it's welkim yez are, to ther residence ov a jontleman an' a schoolar."

"Looks more like the burro of a kiote," retorted the major, brusquely. "Sorry to see you down to such miserable quarters. Not quite what it was in the good old times, eh, Isaac?"

As the major spoke he raised his hand and made a peculiar motion with his fingers, which was duplicated by Muldoon as he answered:

"Indade, an' it's not. In the owld toimes it's kings an' princes ther Muldoons waz, in ther good owld County Kerry, wid a regular castle, lashin's av ate an' dhrink, an' nothin' to do at all, at all, but foightin' an' dhrinkin', an' sich loike."

"Fought principally with unfortunate travelers, and the first letter of their king's name was Hair-pin Harry? Eh, Isaac?"

"Howly Moses!" exclaimed the Irishman, seemingly taken all aback.

"Where did yez iver hear av Hair-pin Harry?"

"Hush, Isaac! Not too loud. I dropped onto you by your remarks about being a gentleman and a scholar. It had been a good many years since I heard the last line, but I don't forget, and I said: Here's one of the old Hair-pins. I'll stick a pin there, so that when I need a man I'll know just where to find him. And, Isaac, I need a man now, and you're the one for my money."

"Be the blessid piper ez played afore ther howly Moses! I b'lave it's Hair-pin Harry hisself."

"Hush, Isaac! Not so loud. I can't say that it makes very much difference to me what people hear; but it really is not necessary to give away a good thing to all the Gulch. Perhaps you're right. If so, you will remember that Harry always had his own way. If he says, 'Now, Isaac, my noble lad, I want you "bad,"' it is pretty sure that he'll get you. You see, there are generally a few gentleman who do as he says, and they always make it very lively for those who don't."

"Sure, an' av it's ther Hair-pins yez have behindt you, bad luck to the mon phat says no. He mou't betther be did an' in purgathory. Phat is it ye'z after? If it's in the power av Ike Muldoon, ther jontleman an' schoolar, it's done it'll be."

"Glad to hear you talk so, Isaac; just remember that your neck is in a noose, if I lift my finger, and that if you try to throw off on me you'll get a bullet in your back, as the first entrance in the course of sprouts. I think I can trust you; and if the fellows that are in with you make up their minds that they can't they will know what to do. I want to get this point down solid in your mind before we begin."

"It's a moighty long toime yez are takin' ter git to that same beginnin'. Afore long, me fri'nd phat stays wid me, Charley Sands, will be here; an' then this fat will be in the foire, fur an illegant bit av conversation."

"Very true, but times are not as they used to be. As for Sands, I'm ready for him if he should turn up. I'm not sure but what I want him as badly as I do you—perhaps more so. If it was not to provide for him I might not trouble you."

The major coolly lighted a cigar, without offering one to the Irishman, and puffing away for a few moments in silence, regarded him attentively.

"You're pretty hard up, anyhow?" he asked at length.

"Moighty harrud up. Be the same token, ef I hadn't been I wouldn't hev hed toime ter be nursin' Charley Sands, at all, at all, an' av that m'anes there's a betther toime comin', yer welkim as the flowers in May. Is it robbin' the mail?"

"Nary mail this time. It's a job I'll let out to you alone, or I furnish the pards and let you boss the job. I want clean work, and there's no one I can trust like one of the old Hair-pins. They understand that if the thing is not done right I'll kill all parties concerned."

"But there pay, major? It orter be a hape av gould whin there's such rusk. It's a throat-cuttin' you'd be afther askin' fer; I say it in yer oye."

"Wrong again, Isaac. There's no murder to be done. If that was all I'd do it myself, and save the five hundred I intend to pay for the work in question. You probably know the niece of Jean Lafitte—the man who runs the *Lame Eagle*—has lately come to visit him. She has passed here a number of times, sometimes on horseback and sometimes on foot. Perhaps you have noticed her?"

"Notiss is it yez are sayin'? Faith an' it's did gone I am on her, outoیره. Az foine lookin' a vargin as iver throd shoe-lither, an' it's Isaac this, an' Isaac that, quoite sociable az she goes pasbt. An' av Hair-pin Harry's ther same mon az av ould he'd be soldin' up to her afore any ither av the b'yes cuts in."

"That's right, Isaac; that's just his little game. But he wants to take his own way for it. The job on hand is to carry her off. Do you think you can do it without Ground Hog finding you out? Or the girl either, for that matter?"

"Fur foive hundrid dollars! Hivin bless yez, captain darlint, it's a dozen Oi'd like ter kerry off on the same terms! Whin did yez want it; an' where shall she go?"

"It will be in a day or two—I'll give you the office. You remember the cave on Black Knob? There is where the goods are to be delivered. How many pards do you want?"

"Niver a pard. Oi'll jist go it alone, an' capthure ther whole foive hundrid. But as I said afore, phat to do wid Mither Sands is more thin I say. Av I don't kim in at noight he'll know it; an' a moighty nate man is he at puttin' two an' two together."

The major could not complain of any lack of enthusiasm in the acceptance of his offer; but Muldoon seemed troubled over the one difficulty in the way, and scratched his head in some perplexity.

"Never mind Sands. By that time he may be arranged for. If not, the probabilities are that I will be leading him, and the half of the Gulch, in the opposite direction, and he will never know whether you came in from your claim. It is fixed, is it?"

"All but the 'arnin' av ther money. But Oi must have the half av it afore Oi shtir. It's shkip Oi may have to, widout comin' back; an' harrud toimes it wad be av Oi had no coin afther sacrofoizin' ther noice, comfortable residence forninst yez."

He waved his hand around with a grand air. The dug-out was furnished with a rude fire-place, several pans, kettles, tin cups and tin plates, and two couches of leaves. The claim—a mile away—was so barren that he only worked in it for diversion.

"I expect you couldn't make a change that would not be for the better; but it's not likely there will be any necessity for you to leave the place. If you are as sharp as you used to be you will be back again the next day, all right, and your pocket full of rocks. All the same, you shall have a hundred in advance. I prefer your undertaking the work alone, but I will inform you beforehand that a man will follow you

within rifle-shot from the time you get the money till the time you get the girl. If you don't play me fair, and earn the coin—down you go. I've trusted you squarely, Muldoon, because, from first to last, the Hair-pins stuck together solid—or died. You won't be likely to forget that, or your oath. Here's your hundred. Keep a sharp lookout and be ready for work when you get the word. So long, I'll see you later."

The major through the interview was as matter-of-fact as if he was simply arranging for accommodations at the Hotel de Muldoon. He spoke without hesitation of what he wanted done, and evidently had great faith in the old league of the Hair-pins. He asked for no pledge of secrecy, and made no further threats to secure silence; but having received Muldoon's promise arose to go.

"Yez wouldn't take a drap av ther cr'atur afore yez go?" suggested Ike. "It's dbyr walkin' widout ther inspiration ov ther blessid jooce ov ther corn."

"Thanks, nothing! I am strictly business tonight. Speak to me some other night; I must be going now. Good-night."

As the major would not be detained, Ike bowed him out with every mark of sincere respect, holding the lantern for him while he ascended the uncertain and dangerous steps. Then he went back, lit his pipe and seated himself on a low, rough stool.

"Sure, an' it's only to ther jintleman and schoolar sich look kims," he said aloud.

"Walls have ears, they say, but if ther walls are listhenin' they kin an' welkim, fur it's too delighted I am ter kape quiet. Foive hundred dollars fur a wee bit av a girrul I kin kerry in the schmall ov me hand! An' a hundrid down! Glory! Oi couldn't refuse ter take howld av ther job, an' av it's all a mishtake, ther ither mon musht shoot ther quicker, if Ike Muldoon's ther loser. Sure, an' Oi'll till ther little girrul all about it to-morry mornin'."

He chuckled softly, and then sat there, thinking, until he fell asleep; nor did he awaken until the crash of firearms, somewhere near, brought him to his feet with a bound.

"It's me new boarder comin', an' ef half ther Goulch is behind him, it's not wan bit Oi'd be soorprized. Betwixt him an' the major Oi hav' a coontract. Howld 'em livil, b'yes. Oi'm kimin' wid ther sthick!"

He caught up a stout cudgel that leaned against the wall, near the door, and bounded up the stairway two steps at a time. When he had got fairly into the moonlight he saw his two boarders sauntering toward him, Sands with his hands in his pockets, and Morton carelessly swinging his cane.

CHAPTER VIII.

BLOOD ON THE GROUND.

THE distance from the town to the dug-out in the Gulch was about half a mile, and the way was lonesome. It was bright moonlight in the trail, but on either side were dark shadows; and at points among the mesquites there were lurking-places where half a dozen men might have lain concealed. Charley Sands glanced at these from time to time, but with slight concern in his face. The countenance of his companion showed none at all.

Morton had hardly noticed the allusion to Bart Harrington, though Sands supposed that of course he had understood it. The conversation languished, and as they neared the Hole in the Wall they were both silent.

"Ah!" whispered Sands, catching Morton by the shoulder with his left hand, and raising his right, which was still in the side-pocket of his coat.

Then there was a crash of pistol-shots, the same that Ike Muldoon had heard; and Morton's hat went spinning away in front of him.

"Weally, aw, the wind blows distwessingly hahd—when it does blow. It is foachunate it is the wight diwection."

He stooped and picked up the tile, which he placed on his head, and then turned inquiringly toward Sands, who was gazing into the mesquites, where the darkness was most intense.

"Oh, come on, if that's the view you take of it. It strikes me I saw a flash of lightning and heard a crack of thunder. These storms are singular things. You can hear the gust go roaring through the bushes."

There was a sound in the darkness, but it was more like some one tearing away in hot haste.

Neither, however, made further remark, and as they turned toward the dug-out and resumed their walk, they saw some one approaching, and recognized Muldoon.

"That is it, me darlints?" he exclaimed, rushing forward.

"A corpse in the bushes, Ikey—at least that's the possibility in the case. And a hole in Mr. Morton's hat. As we came along a couple of fellows tried pot-shots, and when I let 'em have it, so"—he raised the skirts of his coat, his hands still in the pockets—"why, one of them dropped and the other ran away. But maybe the salted man has the strength to crawl. We didn't stop to investigate. The hour is late and it is time for us to be in bed."

Morton turned with a gasp.

"Aw, hold on, yaw chappies. Good gwacious! Do yaw mean to say yaw shot a man? It is weally too dweadful."

"Don't get wild over it. You didn't suppose I was letting all the fun be on the one side? When I saw your tile spin I let drive. Did you think it jumped off of itself? And what did you suppose I was doing with Bob Ridley and his pard in the mesquites?"

"Bob Widley! I don't undawstand."

"The galoots you had the racket with at the Lame Eagle. I was looking for them on the way home; and if they could shoot for a cent, by moonlight, they'd have had us sure."

Morton waited for no further explanation, but strode directly into the mesquites.

"Blame me if I understand him at all, Ike. He's either got the nerve of a pile-driver, or else he's the champion fool from 'Way Back."

"Let's say phat he foinds," retorted Ike, following after Morton, while Charley seated himself on a convenient bowlder.

"If my ears are worth shucks, he won't find anything; and I don't see that it will pay to go help him. But I suppose it won't be the correct thing to bunk in before they show up. I'm awfully sleepy."

Sands gaped in good faith. As the danger, if danger there had been, was over, he had no further interest in the ambushade.

There was a glow in the darkness, for Morton had lit a taper match; and by its little flame was looking eagerly around.

"Thah is blud on the ground; but the men, aw, seem to have got away."

"Let 'em go!" shouted Sands. "They'll turn up again, and we'll have a better show at 'em. You can't do any more to-night, unless you want to racket around the whole of Ground Hog, and find they've hunted their holes. Come on, and turn in!"

"It's right he is," added Muldoon. "They've shkippped by the loight av the moon."

With some reluctance Morton withdrew. He did not think of any further danger, and did not seem to understand why the other two did not care to be rooting around in the dark after the would-be assassins. He followed silently to the dug-out.

"Hello, Ike!" exclaimed Sands, as they entered, "you've had a visitor. What the thunder did Major Martle want around here?"

"How d'yer know he's bin here. It's a moighty bahd mistake yer moight be afther makin'."

"Don't I smell his cigar, Isaac? I'd know it a mile off."

"An' is it me poverty ye'd be afther makin' fun av? Sure, an' ef I picked up his sbtoomp, it's not Mishter Sands that should be notissin' it. You'll foind ther rist av it in me dudeen, just phere I dropped it when I heard yez shoot."

"Have it yer own way. The man that's ready first takes the inside of the bed, and I'm ready now."

In five minutes the light was out and the three men were snoring. Sands always slept when he had the chance, and nothing better to do; while Morton was as thoroughly tired as he ever got.

At the breakfast table—and what he had he could arrange in very palatable shape—Muldoon made an announcement not altogether pleasant.

"You b'yes'll hev ter take a cowlid chuck, or cook yer own dinner, or wait till darruk. It's me claim Oi've bin niglectin', an' somebody'll be joompin' it av Oi don't do ther warruk."

"Why in the name of goodness don't you hire somebody to work it then? Don't you think, really now, that it's beneath the dignity of a prosperous hotel-keeper to be punching around with a pick and shovel? Consider the reputation of your boarders if you have no care for your own."

"Hoire a mon, wad yez? An' ef Oi paid the mon wid me tin dollars it's moighty apt you'd be to shtarve. D'yez think grub grows on the bushes, an' O' shake it off in a pail? It's harrud cash Oi pay, an' many's ther growl about ther back dibt."

It was a little hard to tell if Muldoon was in earnest, or if his indignation was assumed, so Sands did not care to pursue the subject. If he had heard the conversation with Martle the night before he might have thought he understood it. Morton looked up.

"Aw—Mistaw Muldoon—as I have nothing to do till dawk, couldn't I—aw—help yaw? Or, pwehabs, prospect foah, aw, myself?"

"There's an illegant chance to prispict; but sorra a bit av a color doz I think yez will be foindin'. Oi'll look 'round me ter day, an' ef I see a loikely shpot Oi'll let yez know an' yez kin begin ter sink a hole to-morry."

"And, by the way, Isaac," interposed Sands, "do you think it the act of a gentleman and a scholar to do the work on his claim on Sunday, and spend the rest of the week in riotous living? Don't you think you'd better wait until to-morrow yourself before you begin?"

"Thru fur you. Bedad, I niver thought av that. But Oi'll jist go over to-day an' say how ther owld claim looks whoile you're takin' Mishter Morton 'round, an' makin' him acquainted wid ther b'yes."

"It's not exactly the day I'd prefer bringing Signor Salavator de Salverini into particular

notice. Saturday night is bad enough in Ground Hog; but Sunday is perfect old business. If Bart Harrington keeps on h'isting benzine, and gets his gang together, somebody'll have to add a notch to his record. It's a better time to stay at home and look after the week's wash."

"Suit yerselves; but it's a cowlid dinner yez will be havin' ter-day—er none at all. Oi'm shtartin' whin I git ther pans cl'ane."

Since the time Mr. Sands, shortly after striking the Gulch, had been cleaned out financially, he had not figured very brilliantly in society. No one knew much or cared much about him, unless it was Muldoon, and his knowledge was indefinite and not very extensive.

Still, Sands knew the way around the Gulch and was well enough posted about the Lame Eagle and its frequenters. During the day he started to call on Jean Lafitte, and took Morton with him.

The little Frenchman did not reside in the saloon building, but in a small dwelling adjoining, and there was a doorway connecting the two houses.

The two were passing this little residence, and just at that moment there was a woman of middle age, or very near it, standing on the porch, and by her side, Selka.

"Yonder is the man who, yesterday, saved my life," Selka had said, as the two came in sight; but she hardly noticed the great start that Elsie Dupin gave when her eyes fell upon Morton.

"So young—so young!" the elder woman muttered, and there was hardly the light in her face that one would have expected to see there; with her eyes resting for the first time on the man who had saved Selka.

The girl, however, smiled, and held out her hand. Somehow this young man attracted her in spite of his outlandish ways. She remembered his strength and his courage. Until he opened his mouth he was certainly handsome looking. If she had never heard him talk she would have thought he was worth a dozen Charley Sandeses.

Mr. Morton took the hand without hesitation, and bowed over it while he drawled out a few words of greeting.

"My mother," Selka said simply, turning toward the elder lady. "I have told her of the greatness of our indebtedness to you, and she has been anxious, ever since, to return her thanks. I have also told her of the way you took the camp by storm last night and she has said that she intends to come in some evening and hear for herself. No small honor by the way; for, as long as I can remember, she has been a hermit, so far as we would let her."

"Weally, aw, you make me pwoud. If, aw, she would like a pwivate wehersal at any time, command me."

"No, no!" exclaimed Elsie, with what seemed unnecessary earnestness. "Not that trouble would I have you take. And we thank you, sir, Selka and I, for your courage and kindness. Young yet you are—may I ask you how old?"

"Not old enough, aw, to have weached yeahs ov diskvetion I am afraid; but beginning to feel very old. Twenty-five is about the actual yeahs ov my pilgwimage."

"Twenty-five?" asked Elsie, either doubt or something strange struggling in her features.

"Were you born here?"

"Aw, no, thawnks! N'Yawk's my owiginal stahnting place. Fawthah put me thwough college, an' gave me choice—business with him, or, aw, ten thousand and go as I pleased. I went, aw, as I pleased, and came West. Cholly helped me spend that ten thousand, in Denvah, like the deah fellow he is."

"Your father—was he of the West? To me it seems that I have seen you, though young you are to have met years ago."

"Pwehabs it was fawthaw. He was West once. Not beah, ov cawse, but, aw, somewhah. The weason, pwobably, he don't like it."

"We hope to see more of you," interposed Selka, as a finisher. "Perhaps you have something else at present to occupy your time and we will say good-morning."

Sands had bowed and passed on, as there seemed no particular desire to include him in the conversation. He was lounging just around the corner; and the two entered the Lame Eagle together.

This time Jean Lafitte was present; and he received Morton with more than his usual affability, shaking hands with him wildly.

"Sacre! I was devastated not last night to meet you. For zis it was, to thank you for ze leetle Selka zat you so mooch befriended, ze house of Jean Lafitte, and all zet he has, is at your disposal."

As a general thing Jean showed but little of the Frenchman in his talk; but under excitement the idiomatic style of the man would come back, and he also had a great deal of trouble to articulate his "th's."

"Aw, weally? It was nawthing that I did. A heavier man could have done it better. I have, aw, been thawnked too much alweady."

"Bart Harrington and his gang were trying to thank him permanently, last night," remarked Sands with a comical look. "If you had been about you might have found it necessary to

interview them. Johnny's an A No. 1 tumbler juggler, but to handle such a crowd he's no good."

"No, no! I am verry mooch ashamed; but what could I do? I was sent for, and I went. But now—good! Takesome—ah—benzine. Here I have you and ze day is arlie. You s'all tell me all zat you hafe to say, and perhaps something for you can I do."

"Doan't mentiyun it. You have done more than I could or should have expected, and, aw, I nevah dwin'."

"I say, Morton," began Sands. "If you don't fight or drink in serious earnest, I'd advise you to move out of this. We can't always be with you, and it's going to be an awful pull on a fellow's reputation to try and keep up yours. Can you shoot?"

"Call me Harry, please, like you used to. I nevah twied much, but I think, aw, I might shoot."

"The thunder you say? Why didn't you let it out sooner. You may be good for something besides the violin. Here comes Bart Harrington and his pards—you'll have a chance to show what you can do right now."

CHAPTER IX.

JEAN LAFITTE SHOWS HOW TO DRAW.

It was early in the day, and the attendance at the *Lame Eagle* was not large. Most of the miners had not their week's wash disposed of yet. When Charley Sands and the young man from Denver came in, the room looked comparatively deserted, though that was not likely to last for long. When Bart Harrington and his pards made their appearance, there was quite a gang in their wake.

Bart had been drinking heavily for several days, and though he was sober just now, he was all the worse for it. Until he had a dozen drinks he would be in a tearing bad humor.

Sands drew his friend to one side, and hoped against hope that the stay of the callers would not be for long. They filed up to the bar, and Jean set out the decanter without waiting for a request. He knew the one thing they wanted; and that was whisky. They might also want blood, though that remained to be proved.

Having set down the decanters and given the time of day, Jean turned them over to the care of Johnny Barker, the amiable bartender, and went over to Sands and his friend, the three seating themselves at a small table and beginning again the broken conversation on the cigars they each lighted.

In spite of his speech, Morton seemed to make himself peculiarly agreeable to the Frenchman, who drew from him a repetition with embellishments of the story of his journey from Denver, including what had happened at the ford. He said nothing, however, of what had taken place at the *Lame Eagle* the previous evening, or of the attack that had been made on the way to the dug-out in the gulch.

The Frenchman made little interruption, and for ten minutes Morton drawled on, Lafitte listening to him, while Sands, with face turned systematically toward him, was in reality keeping a close eye on the movements of Bart Harrington.

For a time the latter did not seem to recognize the young man who, nearly across the room, sat with his back toward him earnestly conversing, and when his eyes rested on him it was in an abstracted way that showed no particular meaning. It was about the time that Morton was expressing his gratification at being able to earn a humble living fiddling in the orchestra at the *Lame Eagle*, that Bart, without a word to his friends, strided across the saloon.

Without moving, in an undertone Charley Sands interrupted:

"Eyes open, he's coming for your meat, Harry."

The warning passed unnoticed, Morton drawled on, Jean listening, until a heavy hand came down, with a whack, on Le Roy's shoulder. It not only came down, but it stayed there, closing in with a gripe that would have made an elephant squirm.

"Aw! ouch!" shouted Morton, with a liveliness in striking contrast with his late drawl; and he made a frantic effort to leap away from the clutch. The spring, if unchecked, would have landed him on top of Jean Lafitte.

"Glad I see yer, pard!" growled Harrington, his hand holding the other in his seat without a visible effort.

"Thar war some foolishness last night afore we knowed what sorter a red-headed, blue-bellied, bob-tail duck you war. But when yer turned out sich a reg'lar ringtail roarer we jist dropped all that like a hot 'tater. Shake, ole man, an' call it squar'."

Morton peered up over his shoulder at the lowering face above him. It was a shivering timid glance, that did Bart's soul good, and he was somewhat surprised to see a small, shapely and clean, though even browned hand come up as well as it could, while the drawl, with just the least bit of quaver in it, began:

"Doan't mentiyun it, please. It's of no consequence, doanchaw knaw. But, aw, if it's all the same, please doan't be so energwetic. It weally hurts."

The big hand of Bart Harrington shot out and covered the smaller one of Le Roy Morton, the shoulder gripe at the same time relaxing.

The pump-handle business began; but this time Mr. Morton did not squirm, and the vigorous motion died away after a little, while, as far as such a thing was possible, Bart grew red in the face.

"It's all a trick, old chappy," Le Roy murmured, as their hands fell apart. "I leahrned it fwom the boys' doan't cher knaw, an' I've got it down flae."

"I reckon yer hev," growled Harrington in response. "Thar's suthin' in yer arter all."

"Vewy little but bweakfast," answered Morton, "but I'd sooner have bweakfast than cold lead. Sit down and have a sugaw."

"Don't keer ef I do," answered Bart, dropping into a seat, and turning toward Sands.

"Friend ov yours, I jedge. Whar did ther anamile come frum?"

Sands was holding his cigar daintily between the first two fingers of one hand. With those of the other hand he was stroking his mustache. He did not appear to notice the offensiveness of the rough's address.

"He says he's from Denver, and I guess he ought to know. We've sorter hitched on as pards, and if he can't make the conversation interesting you might address yourself to me. We're much of a bizness, and it don't make a heap sight of difference if you can't tell t'other from which."

Sands had been a resident of Ground Hog for some months, and, really, this was the first time he had asserted himself. He slid into a game shortly after his first appearance; and from the nerve and bad luck he then showed perhaps it was suspected that he was a chief in run of bad luck, and a man that it might be as well to let alone.

Then he was taken sick, and when he made his reappearance as the leading member of the orchestra his position for the time being protected him. The idea of his deliberately going for Bart Harrington was simply ridiculous, so that Bart took his words simply to mean that the two were very good friends.

"Mebbe you're one of them kind that don't drink, either. Blame me, ef I kin see whar they git up sich men!"

"Oh, yes. I'm the drinking member of the concern. Morton plays the fiddle, and I do all the rest. Drink, shoot, or handle the pasteboards—it don't make much difference to me as long as I have a healthy old buckskin to back me. When I haven't I sing small till some blazing big baboon trys to scratch my fur the wrong way. Then, if I can't jump the game, I salt him."

"You do? Why, blast my eyes, ef I ever see'd sich a leetle runt or a rooster crow quite so loud this time in ther day. You'd better keep on singin' small er some one 'll h'iste yer heels an' kerry yer out."

"You say? Thanks. I'm generally around when the fun's over; and I'm giving you this piece of advice, Mr. Harrington. Ef you ever draw on my friend, here, I'll drop you dead in your tracks before you can pull trigger. That's got the bark all on and goes for solid sense. You hear me remark?"

Charley talked without any flourish—to look at his smiling face it was hard to believe that his lips were breathing fire and slaughter—but there was any amount of business in his voice, and Bart began to believe at last. He had been met considerably more than half-way. His face flamed with rage and his hands made a quick movement. When a little fellow like Sands talked that way to a giant like Bart it was pretty certain that he had no intention of winding up with an appeal to nature's weapons; and it was very likely that he was dying to have pistols for two and cold meat for breakfast.

"Meester Harrington!"

The voice of Jean Lafitte was heard for the first time since the desperado had joined the circle.

"Zis is my house, and zere are my revolvaires zat you can see undair ze table. I talk to you no ozzer way. Eef friendly conversation eenterest you no longaire, you can leave ze house. If you stay you must yourself behave like any ozzer man, or you die! To me you have nothing said, nevair! To begin now is not ze time. Outside you may say what you choose, but inside zese are my friends, an' zey s'all be ze same as myself. Zat is ze way I have ze *Lame Eagle* run, an' zere is no deescount on what I say. You understand?"

Everybody about seemed, to Bart Harrington, to be deadly cool; and though no one else could see them, his eyes were upon the pistols that Lafitte held low down, and he noted that the barrels pointed straight at his breast. Jean was known to be a phenomenal shot with both rifle and pistol.

In spite of all that, it was a wonder to Bart that he was able to contain himself, or why his head should be so wonderfully clear, as he spoke:

"All right, my boys. Yer don't seem to keer about fun, an' ye're hintin' thet my room's better than mv company. Ef ther *Lame Eagle* kicks ag'in' our style, we kin go outside. Ef we

do, you two leetle runts hed better stay inside, fur ther fu'st time I ketch yer I'll knock yer two heads tergether till ther brains runs outen yer boots!"

Then he coolly walked back to his crowd at the bar, called for drinks all around, and when they had been disposed of, stalked out at the head of the procession.

"Zat is a bad man," said Lafitte, watching Harrington keenly until he had disappeared. "Ze gang shoots as he winks, and ze wondaire is zat he has not ze effort made. To take wataire, is ze s'ing zat I have not seen him do. Zere was ze reason, and it is ze reason zat poozles me."

"I thought you showed him two good, solid reasons. How in thunder you managed to make 'em turn up so neatly, just when nobody was expecting them, blame me if I understand!"

"Zose were not ze reasons. Ze wataire he nevaire takes for ze weapons nor for ze man behind zem. No, nevaire! Zere must be ze somet'ing else, w'ich we will find out when it s'all be too late."

"But, aw, bless my soul, Cholly, what's it all about?" broke in Morton, who was watching the proceedings with an anxious eye. "What, aw, did he mean? He seemed quite mad. Weally, I don't unde'stawnd. I tweated him wight, didn't I?"

"Can't say that you distinguished either yourself or me by your treatment. You ought to have had a derringer in your side-pocket, and when he began to bump himself, let him have it—so! It would have saved considerable, hereafter, or I'm no judge of prophets. As Lafitte says, he didn't hold himself in for nothing. Confound it! it's been so long since I've had an out and out good time, so long since I've had fun by the cord, that I'm dying to get at work once and see if I can still shoot my string. What an elegant time I just missed having!"

"Cawn't say thet I'm sowy, aw. He might have missed yaw and hit me, doan'tchaw knaw? If yaw want taw shoot so bad come out in the yawd and shoot with me, aw."

"Yes," said Lafitte, rising. "To see what you two can do wiz ze revolvair, zat would be good. I will know zen whezzer ye orchestra to—what you call him? Deescharge? or whezzer to raise zair salary."

"And all Ground Hog will know whether Charley Sands is a safe man to go for. Bring on your audience and I'll get the show ready."

CHAPTER X.

SELKA SEES SOME SHOOTING.

ALL Ground Hog knew that there was something queer about Elsie Dupin—the worthy saloon-keeper's niece. She was not insane; but there seemed at times to be a want of balance somewhere, and she always had a half wild, half scared sort of look, though her face had carried this expression so long that Jean and Selka had ceased to notice it. And then, Jean alone knew what had gone before it, and that for months after she straggled into his little cabin, in the far off northeastern woods, some twenty years before, she had been bereft of reason.

No history of herself had she ever given, but in those earlier days it would not have been well for Francois Dupin to have fallen into the hands of Jean Lafitte. It was not hard to guess that the girl had been through some awful sufferings, or that in one way or another her husband was accountable for them.

But Francois did not fall into Jean's hands, nor, in all the wanderings of the latter was he ever heard of. Most probably he was dead; and no one seemed to have any regrets. Even Selka never inquired for him, since she had so long looked up to Jean Lafitte as a father that she seemed to care for none other.

Jean sometimes thought of him, with less anger and more curiosity, in these later days; but he knew the vanity of making inquiries from his niece, and held his peace.

When Sands and Le Roy Morton passed out or sight Selka looked at her mother and was amazed.

Elsie was leaning helplessly against the door, her hand to her forehead and a stranger look than usual in her eyes.

"What is it, mother?" was Selka's anxious question, as she sprung to her side.

"Are you ill? Let me help you into the house, and call uncle."

Elsie pushed her off and made her way in unaided, but with an uncertain, staggering step.

"Let me call uncle," again suggested Selka.

"No, no, I will be better soon. It was nothing. That face! Could it be—after all these years? It all comes back to me—and his most of all!"

She spoke in French now—a Canadian patois into which she often lapsed, and which was almost a mother tongue to Selka, though there lingered no traces of it in her ordinary conversation.

"What face, mother? What comes back to you?"

"The face of that man—he who you say saved your life. I saw it before, once only, but I have never forgotten."

"The face of Mr. Morton? You must be mis-

taken. When was it? Where was it? how long ago?"

"Miles and miles away; and years and years ago—when you were a child, Selka, a tiny child, and could not even lip your own name."

"But that is impossible. He is a young man, not many years older than I am."

"Oh, you do not know him! Young to-day, old to-morrow! He may come in a dozen disguises, but he is a villain in all of them."

"Really, mother, these are hard words to use of one I cannot help but think you have never seen before, and who has just done me so great a service."

A stranger look than ever came upon Elsie's face. With a quick dart she seized Selka by the arm.

"Girl, tell me the truth! Do you care for him? Do you dare to care for him? My eyes have never deceived me, and they have not played me false now. He is disguised as a young man; but the eyes of hate can see through it all. Listen. When you were but an infant on my knee he killed your father."

"My father!"

Selka repeated the words after her, in utter amazement.

"Yes, your father. I have never told you all. Oh, if you knew the truth no smile for him would you ever have again, but you would only seek to lay him dead at your feet."

The words flowed out in a mad stream, as though the floodgates of her soul had just been swept away. Their vehemence electrified her sole listener.

"If I knew the truth? Why not, then, tell it to me all? However black the tale it cannot be worse than the dark suspicions you have raised. The truth! I must know it! My father: was he more sinned against than sinning? For years I have feared to ask of him—feared even, to mention his name. Perhaps I am to know that I have done him fearful injustice in my soul. If only for the sake of his memory, speak."

Again Elsie passed her hand over her eyes, that had a far-away, questioning look.

"It is as a dream," she said, slowly; "yet I know it is all the truth. For a long time I knew nothing. Oh, it was a terrible time. I starved and struggled through the black woods, and made my lair with you in my arms among the wild beasts. All the time I was seeking Jean, and at last I found him. Then I placed you in his hands and fell at his feet. For months it was that I knew nothing, and the only one word I said was 'Selka,' as he took you from my yielding arms."

"But before that?"

"Ah, before that we lived in a large house near the great woods. Rich was your father, and in the house was a great pile of gold. One night the robbers came. Your father saw them come and he and his men fought them from without. They shot, they cut, they stabbed. From the window I saw it all—and I saw the face of the man who led the bandits. It was the face of the man who has just left us."

"What else? There is more to tell. Do not keep me in suspense! What happened, then?"

Elsie had ceased speaking, and, as it were, turned her eyes inward, staring at memory's picture. Selka, for the first time hearing the history of her younger life, was all on fire to know the whole truth at once.

"He was the leader of the bandits and I saw him fire the shot that brought your father down. He sprung up, though, and firing his last shots when all of the men were down, sprung through the heavy door, bolting it behind him. Faint, covered with blood, dying, he staggered to the nursery where I cowered with you on my breast."

"He kissed you once or twice and strained you to his breast till the blood from his wounds reddened all your little face. I was screaming with terror, but I saw his cheeks grow white, and caught you as he was toppling over."

"Take—Selkie—uncle," he gasped, and then he dropped dead."

"I would have fainted but the thunder at the door roused me. The assassins wanted gold; but they wanted the lives of every one there. They meant to spare no living creature to rise up as witness against them. Even your life would not have been safe."

"There was no time to spare. I caught up a cloak for myself, a shawl for you, and crept down the stairway that led to the rear of the building. As the door gave away, and there was a general rush for it by the outlaws, I sprung from a window and ran to the cover of a pine tree that grew but a few yards away."

"Sheltered from view by the shadow of its dark branches, I reached the woods. Behind me rose the shrieks of the women and the shots that slew. An hour later, from where I crouched in the forest, I could faintly see the glare from the burning house. After that I turned my face away and wandered till I found Jean."

"And after that?"

"Nothing. It was months before I knew anything; years before I could remember much of what happened that night. To-day I can tell you more than I could have told you yesterday, for that man's face brought back much that I

had not remembered. There may be more to tell, but I know it not—only that man's face is the face of the man who murdered your father."

"But that cannot be. He is too young. Yet it may have been his father who murdered mine."

Elsie shook her head. She had received a shock such as she could not believe had been given her by any other than the assassin himself.

"It is fate," she said. "He may have been in the same disguise then that he wears now. It was crime then; it will be crime now. Perhaps he has his eye on me and you; perhaps he has sworn that we must die, and has trailed us here. Oh, avoid him! I can see the shadow of death in his eyes, and I know that he is a wolf that has no mercy."

In her excitement Elsie almost, if not quite, overdid her warning. Selka remembered Morton's drawl and his wild, half-frightened look in times of emergency. It seemed to her that he was more of a sheep than a wolf, and that when he was in a position to show mercy, he would hardly be wanting.

And yet there was every sign of truth in Elsie's tones; and Selka knew that she never said anything that in her heart she did not believe. She was troubled, horrified, puzzled and excited. For the first time she had heard a story of her very early life, and it was red with blood. It was in some way connected with a young man—she could not yet believe he was an old one—who had just saved her life, and for whom in turn, she had faced a crowd to whom, under other circumstances, she would have scorned to show her face.

She turned away to think.

The movement brought her near a window, and mechanically looking out, she saw a little crowd issuing from the rear door of the saloon building. By chance it was just the time when Jean Lafitte and the others adjourned to test their revolvers.

She did not understand what was intended until she saw a card pinned up upon a piece of the lid of a cracker-box which was thrust into the ground at long pistol-shot distance. She saw that Jean, Charley Sands and Le Roy Morton were probably the participants and took a certain interest in the proceedings.

There was no question of fancy shooting; nor was there any intention of making a display. Lafitte was anxious to know what sort of man he was befriending. Sands was in an accommodating mood, and Morton wanted, apparently, to assert himself. A little plain work was all they proposed.

Jean Lafitte stepped first to the front, glanced at the mark, raised his revolver, and fired.

The bullet sped very true. There was the quick sound of a spat, and there was a little blue mark in the center of the card, showing where the ball had struck.

Without waiting for a renewal of the mark, Mr. Morton slipped forward. He held a large-sized, self-cocking revolver with both hands, and was visibly excited. He raised the barrel and tried to draw a bead over the sights. The muzzle described a series of eccentric circles, but failed to linger on the mark. Then, to the amusement of the audience, he shut both eyes and pulled the trigger twice.

There was a double report, the one crack following the other so closely that they almost seemed one, and a burst of laughter from the crowd as Morton opened his eyes and stared from the revolver to the card, and then back again to the revolver.

"Heah, Cholly, take it away. The infwernal thing, aw, might hurt somebody. I bwelieve it kicks at both ends!"

Selka's interest had been changing to disgust. The distance was long for quick, accurate shooting with a pistol, but she thought she could hit the card herself. When she looked at it, and saw that its appearance remained unchanged—clear white, with the one little dark spot in the center—she turned away. She would have been more disdainful than ever if she could have heard his whisper to Sands:

"Both balls thwough the old hole, Cholly, as I'm a living sannah! Spwead yawself or yaw'll be left."

Charley Sands returned no answer to the whisper, but took the pistol, recharging it with a deftness that showed he was acquainted with the weapon, and then, with four rapid snapshots cut off consecutively the corners of the card with a neat precision that was wonderful to see.

"Zat is bootiful," exclaimed Lafitte, "and it is vot zey call good enouff. Ve s'all now go into ze house. Ze camp vill know zat you can ov yourself take care."

CHAPTER XI.

A COOL CONFIDENCE.

THE second evening of the engagement of Signor Salvator de Salverini proved as grand a success as the first, though the support of Mamie Stein was by no means equal to that given by Selka on the opening night. There had been some fear in the mind of Lafitte that the audience might call for the appearance of his niece, but luckily that was not insisted on. Bart

Harrington and his friends did not show up, and everything was harmonious.

Mister Muldoon had been as good as his word, and had disappeared for the day, but his boarders found him at home and swearing when they returned from the *Lame Eagle*. They respected his condition, and retired without any attempt at conversation.

Monday morning early Morton made an excursion to the Gulch, and returned without his watch, but with a pick, shovel, a pair of overhauls, and a little loose change that he was thoughtfully "chinking" in his pocket.

Isaac had just finished with his pans and was about to sally forth.

"An' phat in ther name av ther blessid saints wad you be afther doin'?" was his query as Morton made his appearance. "Sure yez look loike ther ass in ther loion's skin wid thim same overhauls a-coomin' up to yer oyes. Wad yez make ther b'yes belave yez were goin' ter warruk?"

"It stwikes me that theah was an awwangement of the kind. Honest industry, doan' claw know, old chappy. Pwduce that claim and yaw will see Le Roy H. Morton spwead himself all ovah it."

"Ye'r my mon. It's yersilf Oi'd be glad ter have fur a neighbor, an' it's an illegant place ter dig that Oi'll be afther showin' ter you."

The two went away together.

It may have been a practical joke on the part of Muldoon; but he had the very spot, in his mind's eye, whereon to locate the young man; and after a wearisome tramp like showed it to him with a grand flourish.

"Thar, mon, yez kin dig fur all phat's in it, an' phen yez foinds ther soight av a color let me know and Oi'll help yez worruk it."

Muldoon strode away, leaving Morton to investigate the spot at his leisure.

A more unlikely spot to strike it rich could hardly have been found in all the region round about the gulch. Not a sign of blossom was there to indicate any richness that lay beneath. Morton looked helplessly around, then spit on his hands, seized his pick and began to sink a shaft.

So far as surface indications went it would take a dozen men about as many years to reach bed rock, and Morton's progress was proportioned on about such a basis. Ike looked back once and saw the pick rise and come down very softly, making but small impression on the flinty soil. Then he went on to his own claim, which, to tell the truth, was but little more encouraging in its outward aspect, save for the fact that there was here at least a hole in the ground.

He did not seem violently anxious to go to work, but seated himself on the ground at the side of the shaft with his legs hanging over and leisurely began to fill his pipe. Then he lit it with a succession of short, jerky whiffs such as an Irishman employs all the world over, and deliberately resigned himself to its enjoyment.

The pipe was not empty when there was a sharp clatter of little hoofs along the trail, and presently Selka Dupin made her appearance.

She rode straight up to the spot. The pony that had departed this life at the ford had been replaced by another of much the same appearance, and she was already on good terms with it. As the accouterments were the same, it was clear that some one had stripped the dead animal for her.

"Mr. Muldoon, I don't know whether or not some one has been playing a practical joke; but I received a letter, signed with your name, asking me to meet the writer here, to obtain some information in regard to my murdered father. Did you send that letter?"

"Whist! not so loud, av yez pl'ases. It's a great saycret."

"A secret it was, and so great a one that never until yesterday did I know anything about it myself. How do you know anything of it?"

"Sure, miss, it's a leetle explanation we'd better be afther bavin' afour we begin wid the saycrets. Muldoon is a jontleman an' a schoolar ave he is barrud up, an' sorra a bit wad he harrum yez. But it's coin that he's afther, an' mebbe we could worruk together so az ter make a hape av it fur Ike, an' not be so bahd for yersilf. I towld yez in ther littler jist phat ther major towld me ter say."

"The major! what major is that? What does he know about the story?"

"Och, murther! but ther cat's out av the bag; an' Oi didn't m'ane ter spake on that parrut at all, at all! Jist furgit that parrut, me darlint, an' go on to ther rist av it."

"You grow more mysterious than ever. What major do you mean? If he wishes to reveal anything, why is he not here to tell me; and if he has deputized you to say anything, why do you hesitate?"

The "jontleman and schoolar" looked all around to see that no one was within hearing distance. The only person visible was Le Roy Morton; but he was so far off—on the higher ground—that they could not even hear the slow strokes of his pick, as they fell at wide intervals.

"Yez say, me darlint," he said, turning once more to Selka, and speaking in a lower whisper than ever, "it's him an' me az don't worruk on

ther same level, at all, at all, aven av we be pards. It's him az insulted a jontleman wid his dirthy proposal, an' Oi'm havin' no marcy fur him at all. He said Oi should till yez that Oi thocht the mon phat killed yer father war at ther Goolch, an' if you'd come an' say me mebbe by the toime I could till yez sure."

"But who is this man? How does he know anything in regard to these matters? Who did he name as the man who did the deed?"

Selka was cool and persistent.

"Well, yez say, he did say I moight drop it out, permiskus loike that, av I wanted, it's somethin' I moight have ter till yez about ther Dude from Denver; but that don't count. I warren't ter send ther letther tell ter-day, so ez you could meet me here to-morry, but Oi sent it yesterdy so I could say yer ter-day an' make some arrangethmont about to-morry."

"Everything is to-morrow. What is it that is to be said or done to-morrow? There must be something in all this rigmarole, since it touches on a secret only known to a few."

"To-morry Oi waz ter kerry yez off."

"Carry me off?"

"Yes—abdoct yez—take yez to phere the mon wad be afther waitin' ter tell yez, all about it. Oi waz ter kerry yez off wid ivery demonstration av ferocity av yez wouldn't go p'ace-ble loike. A big poile av money wad Oi have fer that same, an' a nate leetle sum he put in me hands az a starther. But I thought av yez didn't onderstand it afour hand it's dyin' wid the froight you'd be when Oi sazed yez in me arrums."

"Then you really have nothing to tell me; and this is all a scheme, or plot?"

"Sorra wan av me knows. It's yersilf as shld say. Phat Oi'm afther is airnin' ther coin. Will yez mate me here to-morry an' go p'ace-ble? In coourse this is all betwane you an' me, an' not a worrud to any ither. Af the major know'd it it's cowl'd m'ate he'd be afther makin' av me."

His glance again roved toward Morton in the distance and Selka following the movement of his eyes, thought she understood.

"Do you really expect me to do this thing—to put myself in this danger without knowing that it is to be at all for my benefit? The little I've seen of you I have been inclined to think you a good-hearted, blundering, honest-minded Irishman; but you may be the greatest villain unhanged. Very likely you are if you have anything to do with such villains as you pretend to represent. Why should I, even to learn the particulars of a crime that until yesterday I never even suspected?"

"It's an illegant soobject fer debate," responded Ike, scratching his head. "Jist in a fri'ndly way, why wouldn't yez be afther doin' it, an' not be sayin' a worrud about it to any one at all at all?"

"You wish me to meet you here to-morrow at this time. If I learn nothing meantime perhaps I will come. Whether I will be alone depends upon circumstances. To-day I will not promise. But of one thing be certain. I am never unarmed, and if it seems necessary I will use my weapons to kill. Beware that you do not fall into a trap of your own making!"

"Sure an' that'll be a n'ate dodge, an' ther biggest soorprise av the saison. It's fit ter doie Oi'll be wid ther laffin' at him. But don't say anything tell yez have ter pull, an' thin shoot mighty straight."

Unless the Irishman was the most consummate of actors he was speaking from his heart, and Selka felt convinced that so far as Muldoon's intentions went he desired her no harm. She made up her mind on the spur of the moment.

"Isaac, before this is all done with there will be something too serious for laughing. There has been a great crime done—a crime that the law never reached. I have devoted my life to the doing of what the law should have, but has not, done. Can you not help me? I see no way to reward you now; but the time may come when I can, and meantime you can be one of the instruments to punish."

"It's agreeable Oi am to 'most any priposition from a leddy," responded Muldoon not altogether carried away by the earnestness that began to show itself in her tones.

"But Oi've got me claim, an' me hotel; an' this little job av abdoctin' yez ter finish up, an mebbe Oi'd better not be too riddy ter take a new contract tell I rayson it all out. M'ate me here to-morry, at this toime, an' Oi'll till yez phat Oi think. Yez had better be afther shkip-pin' now, afoure some one kims along an' spoils ther plan."

"Think of it, then. I will see you to-morrow. I need the assistance of a man, and just now you seem to be able to help me more than another. Good-day."

She rattled away on her pony, leaving Isaac to scratch his head, trying to digest the plan which did not seem nearly so brilliant as the time came to undertake its operation.

CHAPTER XII.

MAJOR MARTLE TAKES ACCOUNT OF STOCK.

MAJOR MARTLE nowadays seldom put in an appearance at the Lane Eagle, or any of the other saloons at the Gulch. In former times he

had made as big a record as any sport in the camp; but from the time that he won the Blue Bonanza Mine, and made a strike in it the following week, he had found entirely too much to do looking after his business affairs to waste his time at table and bar.

He knew how to hold himself aloof, however; and he went among the boys just often enough to give them to understand that it was prosperity and not pride that kept him from their midst.

When he did come there was a temporary freedom about the whisky in any saloon he happened to strike, that made him very welcome. If he had not been, the remembrance of the way he used to shoot quick and very wicked, upon the slightest provocation, would have been sufficient to prevent any outward manifestations of dislike. He played his game occasionally with some of the other magnates of the place, and held his own as well as he ever did; but that was no longer looked at as business. Even Major Martle occasionally needed relaxation, and his reputation never suffered when he took it. He was looked upon as staid, solid and thriving; and his little army of retainers, made up from all sorts of material, swore by him very loudly, and were apparently willing to obey his behests through thick and thin.

In addition to his mining property he had an interest in a general store—if, indeed, he did not own the whole of it. He also owned the stage line running north to Cactus Fork, besides being suspected of a silent partnership in other things too numerous to mention.

To look after his interests in all these things took up his time pretty thoroughly, though to assist him he had a factotum, known to the Gulch as "Uncle John."

A quiet, broken-looking sort of man was Uncle John, who had been tolerated at Ground Hog on account of his generally helpless appearance, though looked upon as entirely worthless until he fell into the hands of the major. How it came that he had not starved and yet retained a reputation for strict honesty was a conundrum the Gulch had frequently asked without any satisfactory answer being suggested. He had a claim, to be sure, but no one had ever seen him have the sign of a color that had come from it.

The claim was still supposed to be his, but he had been with Martle for some time. When he was first seen handling a pen in the major's office a smile ran all along the line. As he continued there Martle received due credit for his generosity in providing for the old fellow, and after that less interest was taken in him than in the eight-day clock that hung above the desk at which he sat. After all, the old man was not overworked as a general thing, and as far as could be seen from an outside view might have been a great deal worse off.

Monday evening at rather an early hour, though Uncle John had taken his departure, the major was seated in his office. He was smoking a cigar very slowly, after the manner of a man in thought, from time to time glancing at the door, as if expecting a visitor.

Finally there was a step outside, and Bart Harrington entered, with Billy Rakestraw at his heels.

The major nodded, and motioned to a couple of seats.

"Well, you have been feeling the young man, have you? What do you make of him?"

"I've been a-tetchin' ov his wool lightly, an' I don't think he's got more sense ner ther law allows. But I wouldn't wonder ef that sorter side pard ov hissen war chain-lightnin', with a big L. An' that frog-eater—he's jest lemons on ther draw. He hed me kivered afore I'd begun. Ef it hadn't b'en fur orders I'd have tryed him a fly anyhow; but he knows how ter git ther percentage, an' hole it all through ther game."

"So you think. Billy, what's your opinion?"

"I'm a man ov peace, but I should remark that ef I wanted ary fun I dunno who I'd sooner go to than that same Mister Sands. Ther dude can't shoot fur a cent, but this here boss of ther band can call his shots by name. We all know what ther Frenchman kin do, an' how he likes ter show off when yer git him started. Wal, he jest saw Charley shoot once an' then shut up shop. I tell yer, he knows when ter draw in his horns an' sing small."

"There's nothing in the fiddler, then?"

The major spoke reflectively, and he put the tip of his fingers together with a careful nicety that would have suggested to an observer that he was balancing in his mind some delicate and important problem.

"It's jest this way. Thar's a heap ov blamed fools ez try ter play good men, but thar's mighty few good men ez are willin' ter pass fur infernal idjects. They can't do it! Bart give him all the chance in ther world, an' he never chipped once. If I could ketch him alone, fur ten cents I'd turn him over an' spank him sound."

"Do you think you and Bart could scare him out of town? I'm not too anxious for anything to happen to him, as it might make trouble if he just disappeared; but I'd give something to have him jump the Gulch with the laugh against him."

"Dunno about ther skeer. Fact are, he's not

got sense ernuf ter skeer wu'th a cent, fur he don't seem ter have any idee that he mou't git hurt. But I reckon ef yer pinched him a leetle hard, he mou't squeal. I'm a man ov peace; but I wouldn't mind doin' ther pinchin' fur a proper amount ov collater'l."

"You must be easy with the lad," said the major softly.

"Promise me that and you shall have the chance when the time comes. But I think for the present we have our hands full. If he don't leave of himself, or some of the boys pot him for nothing, a week from now will be time enough to attend to his case. Of course there will be money in it for you. But this Sands is a dangerous man, and I think it would be wise to get rid of him at once."

"Jest what I've bin a-thinkin' I owe him one anyhow. Ef I ain't handed in my chips, it ain't his fault—no sir-ee. See thar."

Billy raised the whiskers on the left side of his face and showed a strip of court-plaster on his neck.

"Um! Looks like a pretty close call. How did you get that?"

"Oh, Bart an' me war goin' ter hev a bit ov fun ther other night, arter ther cirkiss war out, an' went a-promenadin' among ther bushes. Blame his hidel! I never seen a man sling lead so keerless. Never axed who we war, er whar we lived. When Bart pulled he jest raised pistol an' fired."

"Bart hit anything?" inquired the major with transitory interest.

"In coourse! he ain't jest shootin' fur greens. Thar's a hole in ther dude's best hat that wasn't thar when he struck ther burg, I'll bet a dollar."

"Ah, we'll have to take a closer look at him. What was he doing while his pard was picking trigger?"

"Dunno ez he war doin' anything. But he lit a match an' went inter ther bushes ter look fur a corpse arter ther fun war over. Oh, he's a cool one, he is."

"Never mind him, now!" interrupted the major a little sharply.

"I think I can put Sands in shape for you to take hold of to-morrow afternoon, and I want you to take him along—and see that he don't come back for a week or two, and that no one can tell exactly what has become of him."

"Kin we do it?" asked Billy, turning to his partner.

"You've got to," answered Martle sternly.

"No if's or and's about it. It's shorter notice than I expected to give you when I laid the job out, but it's as plain as rolling off a log. I think I can bring him to Uncle Johnny's claim, and there you lay for him and rush him right off into the hills. You can do it without being seen."

"In broad daylight?"

"In broad daylight. You can see what you are doing."

"An' can't we let Ridley in on ther ground floor? He'd jist be dyin' ter hev a hand in ef he knowed anything about it."

"I have other uses for Ridley. He will be with me. Just as soon as you get him in shape so one man can handle him I want the other to get back into town and be seen. If any accident happened that you could both be seen—in one way it would be so much the better."

"It's blame likely ter happen. Bein' ez I'm a man ov peace I'll git out ov ther mix ez soon ez possible."

"Very well, you've sized the man up and cught to know just what sort he is. If you miss the stroke its entirely your own fault, and you'll find that it's your own lookout, too. There's a hundred to be divided between you, and the balance that you get will depend entirely on how you do the job. I don't generally give very extra wages for botched work. Now, run along. I've got another man or two to see, to-night yet. You can lay out your plans and let me know early in the morning how you expect to work the rifle. If it needs any fixing maybe I can give you a point. And, Bart, you've been drinking a little more than is safe for a man with as much in his head as you have. Put the brakes on, or—"

The major did not finish the sentence, which sounded very much like a threat as far as it went. He simply waved his hand firmly, to show that the audience was at an end; and without other answer than a careless "so long!" his tools went out.

"What'n blazes is the boss after now?" asked Rakestraw, when they were out of earshot of the building.

"Dunno; but you kin bet coin thar's a woman in it somewhar."

"Most gin'rally they are, an' it wouldn't be bad to know who she am. He's lettin' Ridley inter that part ov ther game, an' I'm gom' fur him ter know. But say, Bart!"

"I'm sayin'."

"Ain't this job goin' ter be hefty?"

"About er ton ter ther squar" inch, ez I figger it."

"Wouldn't be er had idea ter hev a pard er two in ther ring. Needn't blow on ther major; an' thar's coin ernuf in it fur half a dozen."

"Right you are. It's jest whar a pard comes

in at. But you must take keer. It won't do ter throw off on ther boss. Ef he finds a man givin' him away, it's all good-mornin'. He's ther style we can't hurt, but ef he gits after us with his shooters we're all paid fur an' no questions axed."

"That's so; but we ain't throwin' off. We'll take ther 'sponsibility with our pards, an' I'm goin' ter hunt fur 'em now. You kin go erlong."

The two had stopped and held their conversation in whispers. They would indignantly have denied the possibility of being overheard, yet they were. Uncle Johnny was crouched almost in reaching distance, with his ears open to take in every word.

"Ab, at last!" he muttered. "The game must be coming to a crisis, and soon I will know all!"

CHAPTER XIII.

ALL TO THE RESCUE.

SELKA went away from the interview with the Irishman full of doubt and indecision, so that the comical side was almost entirely overlooked.

The great fact was that some one knew all about the mystery of her past life—more, at least, in regard to her father's death than her mother did.

Whatever might be their intention—and it could hardly be a good one—the girl thought that she was able to provide against any evil; and once face to face she felt sure that she could learn much. If Isaac intended to remain really and truly her friend, she did not see how any harm could happen her. If he was playing an artful game she would have to use her deringers.

The following day she rode out at the appointed time. When she came to Muldoon's claim she could at first see nothing of him.

She went to the mouth of the shaft and called; but there was no answer.

"Strange," she thought. "As anxious as he seemed to be to carry the thing on I would have supposed that there would be no trouble in finding him."

She had dismounted and slipped the bridle over her arm while pursuing her investigations. A violent start of the pony made her believe that some one was near, and just as she turned her head a heavy hand was laid on her shoulder.

"Oi'm coom ter abduct yez."

The voice was low and sepulchral, but she had no difficulty in recognizing it, nor the wonderful-looking object she confronted, when she wheeled at the sound.

Mr. Muldoon had chosen to appear in disguise. It seemed like nonsense to Selka; but Isaac knew a thing or two, and took measures accordingly.

He had evidently stuffed his clothing with some kind of filling until he looked to be twice as large around as he really was, and wore a hat that ran up to a peak, so that at a little distance he appeared a much taller man. A huge, false mustache, black as a coal, ornamented his upper lip, and long locks of the same color hung down over his shoulders. He certainly would not have been recognized at a casual glance; and had more the appearance of an Italian brigand than anything else.

"What nonsense is this?" exclaimed Selka, looking him over, and uncertain whether to laugh or be angry.

"If you could disguise your voice as well as you have done your person I would think twice before going with you. As it is, you look too ridiculous to be afraid of. Whither do you want to lead me?"

"Arrah, thin, it's not meself that wants ter be talkin' wid ev'ry fool phat may be prowlin' 'round. Ez a stranger, it's not loikely they'll be afther sp'aking at all, at all. Av they do it's this Oi'll be answerin' them wid, an' don't yez furgit it."

He scowled ferociously, and shook the huge navy six that Selka now saw he held in his hand.

Both look and gesture were lost upon her.

"You don't answer my question. Where do you wish to take me? Who am I to see?"

"Wan thing at a toime, av yez pl'aze. It's a mon I wants yez ter say; an' a monstrous bad mon at that. Will yez be afther comin' 'long wid me, er must I be exorcisin' force? It's not long I have fur foolin'."

"I have decided to go with you; but I warn you to be very careful. I am rather inclined to look on you as a friend—but I am protecting myself. At the first symptom of anything that looks like treachery, down you go."

"Yer wilkin' ter play ther game ef yer thinks it kin be done wid me; but Oi'd advise yez as a fri'nd not ter dhrive me to extremities. Say yis er no, an' Oi'll be afther knowin' me coourse. It's a harrud roide, an' a long wan, an' I must know how you'll be wantin' ter take it."

Muldoon seemed to have become a new man with his new clothes; and Selka began to wonder whether this style of his was altogether a disguise.

Yet she did not hesitate, since she was more than ever certain that this "abduction" had

something to do with her father. Unflinchingly she answered:

"I do not know and do not care whether your threats are in jest or earnest. I have given you full warning and shall not speak again. As I really seem to have no choice I can take little credit for yielding. I must know more of the matter concerning which you hinted, and so, as the only way, I put myself in your hands. Waste no time, since I would know all that is to be known."

"Me horse kin carry two at a pinch; but you kin roide az you are fur a toime. Mount an' be off wid yez."

He assisted her to the saddle with rather an unexpected grace, and leading her pony by the bridle started at what was for her a breakneck rate of speed.

The route selected was singularly lonesome. So far as Selka could see they did not pass in sight of any one, even at a distance. If they had done so, thanks to his disguise, Muldoon would not have been recognized. For five minutes or more they raced ahead at this headlong speed.

"Fashter, fashter!" exclaimed Ike, as he turned his head sideways, and seemed to be listening to sounds from behind them. "Sure that b'aste av yours will shpoil it all. Och, murther! It's got ter be did—bad look to ther mon phat meddles wid famales."

As he spoke he suddenly swept his arm around her. Before she had divined his object he had drawn her from her own saddle to a place in front of him and was sending the doubly-weighted horse up a steep incline at a rate of speed that threatened any moment to bring him to grief.

The way—for road there was none—was both difficult and dangerous, and Selka recognized that for the time at least she was fully in the power of the mad Irishman, whose insanity she was just beginning to suspect.

Without an effort he pinioned her arms, so that she could not reach the weapons concealed on her person, and, he held her so that she could see the hideous danger that was near her.

They were on a narrow shelf that wound up along the wall of a deep gash cut through the hills. Above and below was the sheer rock while their foothold was this narrow, rocky, course, but a couple of yards wide at the most. A misstep of the horse seemed to mean death for both of them.

"Och! Be ther powers! Ther thraithor!"

An exclamation of mingled anger, disgust and concern caused Selka to turn her head and look straight to the front.

There was just time for one glimpse of a man with his two hands extended, a pistol in either. Then there was a crash of firearms, the horse gave a convulsive leap, Muldoon's arms unclosed as though released by a spring, and she slipped to the ground with a shock that confused her senses if it did no serious damage to her person.

The next thing she knew was hearing a voice that sounded familiar, though she did not at once recognize it.

"What in Heaven's name is the meaning of all this? Are you hurt? Then, be brave! The danger is over. In an hour you will be back at the Gulch. How fortunate that I started to visit Murphy's claim this morning! Just a sip, please. It will give you strength."

Some one was supporting her on his arm while he touched her lips with a brandy-flask, all the time talking in an effort to calm her agitation. She opened her eyes and found that she was in the arms of Major Martle.

She drew herself away from him, and in the effort found that no great harm had been done. She was perfectly able to stand alone, though for the moment she was silent.

"I saw but one of them—were there more?" asked the major, with more eagerness than he usually showed. "I heard the clatter of hoofs and suspected something wrong, though why I knew not. I drew my pistols; and when I recognized you I knew that you were in trouble and hesitated not a second. Was the man mad? What did he say?"

"He said that he was abducting me," answered Selka very frankly, and he certainly acted as though he might be crazy. I don't think any sane man would dress in such an outlandish costume, and act in such a way."

As yet she had not determined whether or no to screen Muldoon; but with shrewd reticence refrained from giving his name until she could recover her wits and decide what it was best to say.

"Something of method in his madness, at least. The man was doubtless an outlaw though I did not think they had extended their operations so near the Gulch. If you have recovered your strength let me leave you for a moment while I try to see what has become of him. I think my shots hit him, and I know that he went over into the gulch."

He moved forward and peered over the edge of the precipice, Selka following him with a noiseless step.

What she saw surprised her. There was no trace whatever of Muldoon; but, his horse had halted, after that leap that had unseated her,

and wheeling as though on a pivot, dashed back along the trail over which he had come. He was already out of ear-shot—and it was possible that the Irishman was on his back.

The major was troubled, his lips moved, and he muttered half aloud:

"At that distance I ought not to miss and I'll wager he has my ball in his breast. Perhaps I can find blood on the trail."

There was no sign of blood, however, and as it seemed pretty sure that he had not been killed by falling over the rocks it seemed more than likely he had escaped with his steed, positive as Martle had been as to seeing him go over the cliff.

"Never mind," said Selka now entirely at her ease.

"I am safe enough—though I don't exactly see how I am to get home. It's rather a long walk; and I am not sure that I know the way."

"Walk!"

The major put every sound from indignation to reproach in that one word.

"Well, yes, since I see nothing else to do. I could hardly expect you to turn aside from your journey—I assure you I have no further fears, now that I am on my guard."

"You cannot think for a moment that after rescuing you from such danger I would leave you to fall into it again? I shall never take my eyes off of you until I place you once more in Jean Lafitte's hands. After this I think he will see to it that you are more prudent in your rambling. Such little excursions as you are in the habit of taking are no doubt delightful; but if they begin to cost him a few thousand dollars apiece he will have serious objections. Even the Lame Eagle could hardly support such extravagance. How did you come to fall into his hands; and what did he say to you? Could he by any possibility be one of the citizens at the Gulch?"

"I would sooner be a prisoner in the line of rescue, and enjoy the excitement of capture and rescue, than to be cooped up in such a prison pen as the Gulch. But I'll confess the wear and tear of horseflesh is dreadful. I suppose I shall have to go on foot hereafter. As for the capture, I was taken off my guard. The fellow had a grip of steel, and was not running any risks. I believe he would have killed me if I had resisted too strongly."

"And he said nothing of his intentions?"

"Very little. Yet one thing that he did say gave me the shock of my life."

"And that?"

"That he would take me to the man who murdered my father. What could he have meant? Major Martle, did you know my father?"

She had no suspicion of the major, but shot the last question at him as an afterthought. The journey should not be altogether wasted, especially since the return trip was to be made in the company of Martle.

Yet the girl was more than surprised at the effect, transient though it was. Certainly it was more than surprise that made the major start, and that brought such a strange if fleeting look to his eyes.

"Your father? Yes—no—why do you ask that?"

"Because, but the other day, for the first time, I heard the awful story of what happened in my infancy, and I would know more. I will have no rest nor peace until I know who it was that killed my father; and, if the villain still lives, until justice has been done. Answer me. Do you know the man?"

"Most assuredly not—though I confess to knowing something of the story."

"Then tell me what you know."

Major Martle had seen the girl often enough before; but never like this—not even when he had so coldly told her that she must be his wife. She spoke with an imperious fury, and he doubted if he had helped his case by the admission.

But there was no trace in his face of the look of a few moments before. Very quietly he spoke.

"Wait a moment. I think I hear some one approaching. It may be a party of prospectors, or it may be a gang of outlaws. Stand behind me. I can hold the pass against a dozen."

He moved forward, a revolver in either hand; but Selka moved with him, and looking down the decline uttered a shout of joy. Foremost of the half dozen horsemen she saw was Jean Lafitte.

CHAPTER XIV.

MARTLE GROWS CONFIDENTIAL.

THE Frenchman was inclined to be effervescent. He threw himself off from his horse and ran as if to clasp Selka in his arms.

The young lady was rejoiced to see him, but was not quite so demonstrative. She put both hands on her great uncle's shoulder and held her face up to be kissed. Then she gave him a shake, to bring him to reason, and stepped back.

"I am ever so glad to see you, Uncle Jean, but how under the sun do you happen to be here? And I see you have caught my pony. I will be able to get home without compelling some one else to walk."

While Selka was speaking, Jean, over her shoulder, was looking at the major, who had

modestly stepped back. Though he believed that his thanks were due to Martie, he waited for Selka to explain. She caught the glance, and without waiting for answer to her question continued:

"Of course you know Major Martie. You can help me do what I have very strangely failed to attempt—thank him for the courage and promptness with which he came to my rescue."

In an instant the effusive Frenchman had the major by the hand, and was shaking it with a vigor hardly to be looked for in a man of his build and age.

"More than my life have you saved. A thousand blessings! Of Jean Lafitte a friend have you made for life. My poor, foolish little girl! She knows not ze dangair of ze mountains. Courage she has, because she knows not bettaire. Come! We go back to ze camp. Hereafter she shall go not by herself, alone. Her mother shall speak to you. Ah, we are too mooch oblige."

"Do not mention it. I was on my way to the Murphy Mine. I heard a headlong rush and looked, thinking at first it was a runaway horse. As soon as I saw what it was I acted. It is a great pity I did not get the scoundrel, but the fact is I was so much alarmed for Miss Selka's safety when she fell that I totally forgot him. She had a dangerous tumble, but, fortunately, was not at all seriously injured. When I had assured myself of that I looked around. The villain had disappeared, and we were just going to hunt for him when you put in an appearance. How does it come that you were able to find this spot; or did you follow straight upon the trail?"

"It was ze quite providential. Ze gentleman zat lately have arrive from Denver has ze claim on ze hill near ze Gulch. It is ze barren claim. Color will be find zere, never. But it was very good zat he did be there. He saw ze whole s'ing from ze distance, and zen came and told me. I came queek, and fortunate I find ze trail. Ven ze pony zat turn back meets me, I am so much frighten my knees tremble. But on I came. And once more I have my Selka. You see ze ruffian? Vat does he look like, and for why he take the leetle child? Vos he of ze camp?"

"I had but a glimpse of him, but he seemed like a tall, large man, and a perfect stranger. That he took the young lady for the purpose of extorting a ransom from you there can be no doubt. Who he was I cannot even guess. At first I had my suspicions that a certain young man of whom I knew some few things was in some way connected with it, but from what you say I must have been mistaken."

"Vat you say must be ze right, but ve vill hunt around for him. Perhaps we see him. Eef so—zis."

Jean patted the stock of his Winchester that was swung over his shoulder. Every one about the Gulch knew his skill with that weapon at any practicable range. If the abductor showed up anywhere within half a mile it would probably be very bad for him.

As there was plenty of time in which to reach the Gulch by daylight they could afford to spend a little time in hunting for the daring villain. It seemed a little strange that Lafitte had not met him as he had hardly time to reach a point where it was possible to turn from the trail.

First, they examined the gulch below. It was no easy matter, but two men with ready weapons, and aided by ropes scrambled down, all the way looking for some nook in the rocks where some one might be hidden away. Martie had explained that he had at first felt certain that he saw the man fall to his shots and then staggering blindly, tumble into the *barren*.

But no signs did they find, either in the rocks or the gulch below, and the two men did not attempt to reascend but followed the course of the pass, while above, Jean and the rest retraced their steps.

Selka, remounted, rode for the most part alongside of her uncle, but at a point where the roadway narrowed she fell back to Major Martie, and when the opportunity offered allowed him to range up naturally to her side.

"You must not think I am ungrateful," she said in a low tone. "I am not very demonstrative at the best, but I feel all the same. You said you had your suspicions of who was at the bottom of the outrage. Never mind what you have heard or thought of to change your opinion. First thoughts are generally the best thoughts. Who was it that you suspected? What you say should remain a secret, but I want to know so that I can the better protect myself in the future."

"I would cheerfully tell you if my suspicions, even to myself, would not, when spoken, seem somewhat ridiculous, since they are of a man of whom I have barely had a glimpse or two. Better let the matter rest so, and I will watch him for the future."

"But his name. Quick! Tell me his name. I must know. There is more in all this than appears on the surface."

"Better not name him. And yet, even if I am wrong and it goes no further, it can do no harm. I mean the man, young or old, and whatever he may be, that has just come into

the camp, and who is fiddling in your uncle's saloon. The Denver Dude, as I understand some of the boys are calling him. You know who I mean?"

The start that Selka gave was not so much at the unexpectedness of the accusation against Morton, as at the seeming corroboration of Elsie's charge.

The man who was at the bottom of the abduction knew something concerning the murder of her father. Elsie charged that Le Roy was that murderer, while the major thought that he it was who wished to carry her off. If she believed her mother it was more than likely that Martie's first impressions were correct. Why had he formed them?

Selka was silent for a moment, while she revolved these points, though she nodded thoughtfully. When she had digested them she fell back again to the major's side.

"I cannot understand it; but what you say does not altogether surprise me. It can do him no harm for you to tell me why your suspicions were directed toward him. Make me twice grateful by telling me all."

"Not now. I must think it over first, and have a good look at the man. I don't want to be unjust, or harm one who may turn out to be a very worthy fellow."

"But you must have had some reason—a hint will do. Have you no pity for a woman's curiosity?"

"Well, it may do no harm if I am mistaken, and yet tell you that he resembles a criminal I once saw tried for much the same offense. More than that I will not say for the present. Should I recognize him more fully I will let you know. Of course, after what he has done for you, I am sorry to have to say anything that will make you lose your belief in him; but, remember, it was only at your command that I spoke."

"Thank you. I have reason to know that your mistake, if mistake it is, has not been an unnatural one. Perhaps I too may have something to say."

She rode forward to the side of her uncle, who was too narrowly scanning the trail to pay much attention to what she was doing.

Here and there, there were faint marks of a horse's hoofs, but none that could be identified as those of the animal ridden by the would-be abductor.

For a mile, perhaps, the major rode with Lafitte and his party. No trace was found either above or below; and it seemed certain that he had either escaped altogether, or was so well hidden that nothing but a general search could unearth him.

The halt for consultation having developed this as the general opinion, the major bid farewell to the party. It was not yet too late to visit the Murphy claim, and he retraced his steps, while the rest returned to the Gulch.

Jean Lafitte had tried to keep from Elsie the knowledge of Selka's danger; but without success. When half a dozen men hastily mount and gallop out of a camp like Ground Hog, there is always some one who knows the reason why.

Morton, who brought the intelligence, had disappeared about the time that Jean rode away. Somehow no one had thought that he would be a good man to have along, so that he was left out of the preparations. In spite of what she had told Selka, Elsie had him searched for to question. When he could not be found she resigned herself to waiting.

At the return of the successful expedition, Elsie faintly; while a large portion of the population of the Gulch, gathered at the Lama Eagle, gave three cheers, and then fell to discussing the very singular affair.

One thing certainly seemed very strange at the concert that evening: neither the leader of the orchestra, nor the first violinist, made their appearance. Charley Sands and Signor Salvatore de Salavini were both among the missing.

CHAPTER XV.

AT THE WRONG END OF THE ROPE.

WHEN Le Roy Morton saw Selka carried off before his very eyes, he did not recognize the abductor, and never thought of Ike Muldoon. He would have followed at once had he been mounted. As he knew that he could not overtake the two on foot, and there was no horse for him within supporting distance, he dropped his pick and shovel and dashed into camp, where, fortunately, he found Jean Lafitte without the loss of a moment of time.

They were all good men who followed Jean on the trail; and the young man scarcely felt indignant at being left behind. When they had fairly disappeared, he followed on his own account.

"They don't seem to have any use for me," he thought—and of course in his thoughts he dropped the strange drawl that so marred his conversation.

"No doubt Jean Lafitte knows his men, for he seemed to pick them with care, rapidly as he called their names, and as the most of them rode their own animals, I don't know that I have a right to grumble. But at the same time I'd like

to be in at the death, and it's possible that I may get there, even if I go on footback. I'll try it, anyhow. As near as I could make out there was a bend in the trail, that any one on horseback must have taken. On foot I could go straight across the mountain, and perhaps catch up with the procession, if anything happened to intercept its progress. I believe I'll try it, anyhow."

He had lost considerable time going back to the Gulch, and it was only a forlorn hope; but he bent to his task as resolutely as though he knew that Selka and her abductor were just before him. Although the mountains were an unknown land to him, he had a very good eye for direction and distance, and pushed forward without the least sign of hesitation.

He missed meeting Selka and her friends by taking this route; but he struck something else that showed him he was on the scent, and that it was very warm.

In a little rocky amphitheater, which looked to Morton to be almost inaccessible to a goat, he saw a horse browsing among the stunted bushes that grew there. Looking a little closer, he was almost certain that he recognized the animal.

He could not well get down to it without risking his neck, and just then he did not care to do that. Finally he caught sight of a thread of a path leading up into the mountain, that seemed to be barely practicable.

"That's where he came down, I'll bet a monkey; and if a fellow could strike onto that, he could find where he and the young lady parted company. He must have been hard pushed to abandon his horse. It won't do to leave the brute there to starve; but just now I have too much else to look after to waste time on him. He won't starve there for a day or two, and I'll look him up. Now for the rocks."

It was no easy matter to get to the path, but by scrambling along a ledge, crawling over huge boulders, and climbing up the almost perpendicular face of an immense rock, he found himself at last on the trail, and where he could determine a little better where it led from. He followed on upward for some distance, and here and there could see a hoof-print. Then, to his surprise, he heard his name called, and, looking up, saw Ike Muldoon, in his own proper person.

"What're yaw doing heah, Isaac? Weally, when yaw come on a fellah that sudden, he's liable to dwell yaw."

Le Roy looked suspiciously at the Irishman, though he did not recognize him as the tall horseman who had dashed away with Selka. His presence there was, to say the least, very strange.

"Sure an' it's hoidin' I am. Can't ye say that wid hafe an oye?"

"And whose horse is that down yonder?"

"It's that same Oi'd loike ter be afther knowin'. There's more in this than Oi can account fer, an' Oi'm wishin' I wor back at the hothel. Whin Oi intherfare ag'in wid ther damsels, you kin call me a bald-headed liar."

"How's that? Do yaw mean yaw had anything to do, aw, with the attack on the young lady?"

"Of course he had," broke in a voice, sharply. "And if you're not in the same boat, the camp will never know the difference after the settlement. Hands up there, both of you! We have you covered, and would just as soon take you in dead as alive."

It was Major Martie who spoke, and he seemed in very good earnest. Each hand held a revolver that never wavered as it lined its mark. Morton and Muldoon were just near enough to be comfortably covered at the same time.

Nor was the major alone. Three or four men stood right at his back, and they had their weapons out also. It was a pretty sure thing against the two. The moment they reached for pistols they were certain to go down.

"But weally now, aw, doan'tchaw know, yaw cawn't accuse me of that wediculousness. Why, aw, I bwought the news to Gwound Hog, and started Lafitte on the twail!"

"That may be. The great resource of a thief or a cut-throat is an *alibi*. You're a pard of this man who did the work, or tried to do it, and have slipped around to see how he has succeeded. The camp shall judge you, and, if I am not greatly mistaken, the camp will elevate you."

A hoarse growl from the men at his back seemed to indicate that they would like to be at him right now.

"But, aw, Mistah Muldoon had nawthing to do with it, either. I saw the man."

"Quit your chinning and move to the front with your hands 'way up. Last time of asking. Ridley, there, has the disguise that he wore, and he has my mark on his breast that I put there, though he had the girl in his arms. Are you coming, or must we shoot?"

"All wight, I'm coming—I can't, aw, do anything else just now; but, aw, some time I hope to get even."

He moved forward as he spoke, though he was not looking at the major, but keenly watching Muldoon. Martie was talking as though he meant what he said, and Ridley had

held up the suit of clothes that Isaac had stripped off and thrown away.

There was a smutch of blood on the coat, and a hole that corresponded exactly with another smutch of blood and a hole in the coat that Muldoon had on, so that there could be no question about his being wounded. Morton began to think he was getting into a tangle, and was as much puzzled as surprised.

A rope was twisted around his wrists without delay, and then Muldoon, to whom little had been said, was served the same way.

"It's lucky that you fellows were out prospecting," the major said, as he turned to Bob Ridley. "They would have got clean away. I don't understand yet how the Irishman got his horse through that niche and down here in time to escape the notice of Jean Lafitte and the sharp eyes with him. Well for them they did escape. By this time they would have been dangling corpses."

"I dunno ez we're ary softer than the Frenchman," interposed Ridley, with a vicious look at Le Roy.

"It's a clean case ag'in 'em, an' ef we're ther clear quill we ain't stoppin' fur Jean Lafitte. Hyar's yer ropes, thar's yer trees. I say, swing 'em off. How does that strike yer, boys?"

A universal chorus of affirmation told that it struck them very favorably.

"That's ther way we feel, major; what yer goin' ter say 'bout it."

"It won't do, boys. Judge Lynch ought to call the whole camp together before they get their send-off, and the judge is apt to be mighty jealous when he thinks his prerogatives are being encroached on. I'm on my way to Murphy's and can't stop longer, but I think I can trust you to take them to the burg. If there is any attempt at escape that looks as though it might succeed, you'll have to shoot, of course; but otherwise I'll expect you to call the town together, and deliver them at the Lame Eagle. I'll be back in time for the trial. Keep a close eye on the Irishman. I don't think he is hurt as badly as he lets on, and he's a dangerous little man with the tools, if you give him the chance. So long."

The major turned away again, retracing his steps as far as he could find them, leaving the prisoners in the hands of the men who seemed so anxious to make away with them. It was evident that Martie did not intend to put himself out of the way to protect the two.

"Good fur ther old man! I war mighty much afeard that he'd hold 'em tight when he got 'em," laughed one, as the retreating steps were more faintly heard.

"We'll hev ter let him git clean outer range. Then, ropes, do yer duty!"

"Thet's so!" chorused Ridley. "Thar ain't no use fur sich cusses in ther burg. An', 'sides, this hyar one be jumpin' Uncle Johnny's claim. It ain't worth much, but it's all he's got."

"Pris'ners, what hev yer got ter say fur yer-selves? This hyar court hez passed sentence, but are willin' ter hear yer talk—which they wouldn't be down at ther Gulch. Yer hev five minutes ter spout or pray, accordin' ez yer likes, while we's a-lookin' fur ther best limb ter hold yer all both ter one't."

The prisoners were inclined to be obstinate. Neither availed himself of the offer in the ways suggested; both remained watchful and wary.

Much good did that do. Thoroughly pinioned they were; and two men still kept them covered.

The trees were rather scrubby, but suggestively convenient. Ridley was soon suited, and the five minutes were cut short.

"Hyar ye be!" he said; and pointed to two limbs, over which ropes had been flung.

The nooses were adjusted.

"Now then! Up they go!"

CHAPTER XVI.

HOLDING THE DROP MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE.

"Now, then, how long has this thing been going on, and what do you expect me to do about it? Don't hurt yourselves scrambling for your pistols, because I'm just dizzy on the shoot, and I'll make it warm, warmer, warmest for the first one that tries to pull!"

Mr. Charley Sands walked toward the little knot of ruffians with the same mien that a tiger-tamer employs when he is stepping down to his favorite den of "cats." If he had been watching Major Martie he could not have more successfully imitated the manner of that worthy when he took the drop to hold it.

It is scarcely necessary to say that the upward motion was indefinitely postponed.

"Hold hard there!" added Sands, more sharply, by way of warning.

"Can't you see, and won't you do it?"

Bob Ridley's hands almost touched his revolvers, and those of his partners were only a trifle slower in their movement, but they recognized the earnestness of the threat, and were governed accordingly. When a man with an average amount of sense talks that way, he knows that if his orders are not obeyed, he must shoot first or go out of the camp.

"Young man, yer hed better look at ther size ov yer hand an' ther natur' ov ther game afore

you go ter chippin'. This are a private neck-tie party, an' ef yer knows what's good, yer won't be crowdin' it. They's bloody kidnappers, ez we've caught red-handed, an' are goin' ter send over ther range. Draw out; er yer may hev ter go along."

"That's just my name. They're both my pards, and I'm backing them to the extent of a pair of sixes. I haven't been doing much shooting at Ground Hog, but I don't know a gang I'd sooner begin on than just this crowd of murdering cut-throats. If you don't believe it, crowd me a little and see. I'm good for all the material here, and just about as much more before the first one of you could get a hammer back. You, Ridley, take your knife and cut those men loose. Be mighty careful that you don't make any mistake while you're at it, for I won't stop to see how big it is. Jump, now, or I pull."

The gang had turned so as to face the speaker, and glanced at him in angry amazement.

His revolvers never wavered, and his face was cheerful as a May morning.

Bob Ridley saw that the game was very much against him, for he was very especially covered, and the voice said shoot in every tone. From the little bit of pistol practice he had seen in the rear of the Lame Eagle, he was of the opinion that Mr. Sands could place his bullets when and where he wanted them.

"Yer thinks ez yer hez ther under hold thet yer kin take ther advantage. Yer wouldn't talk that way to er man ef yer didn't hev ther drop."

"I talked just that way to your pard, Bart Harrington, and he's a better man than you ever dared to be. I got away with him, too, just as I'll get away with you if you don't do more business and less chinning. I'm watching you; steady now."

The warning was scarcely necessary. Slowly and sullenly Ridley removed the ropes from the two prisoners, and cut the cords at their wrists.

"That's something like. I see you're not ready to make yourself a subject for the bone-yard just yet. Now, what I want done, is for you fellows all to promenade down along that trail; and the first one that stops while he is in sight, or before I tell him, I'll stir him up lively. Git."

It's the first step that counts. Once holding the whip-hand, the rest was easy. Without demur Bob Ridley led the way, followed by the gang.

"And now then, you fellows go on up the trail. I don't want to have them coming back at us with the advantage. We'll talk it up when we get where we can hold them off to better advantage if they try to cut up any monkey shins."

"Be ther powers, it's moightily convaneyent it wor ter have yer 'round. Oi've a six that I dhropped whin I saw the game wor ag'in' me. Here it are. Now Oi'm riddy."

Muldoon had been searching among the rocks. Now, flourishing a navy six, he turned his face up the path and was followed by Morton, who accepted the situation without a word of comment.

After ascending some little distance they were joined by Sands, who had cautiously held the path until they had reached a position where they could in turn command it.

"Thanks, Cholly," said Morton, extending his hand. "I weally did think that time I was elected. I'll—aw—do the same foah you some time."

"Hope you won't have the chance, old man. But I'd like to know what the racket is all about. As far as the surface goes I should say they were trying to close out the Hotel de Muldoon root and branch—proprietor, boarders and all. It was part of the same outfit that was going for me. Good luck it was, too, or I wouldn't have been here."

In a few words Le Roy explained that an attempt had been made to carry off Selka Dupin, that he had taken the news to Jean Lafitte, following out to try and have a hand in the game; and that after finding Muldoon they had been captured by Martie and the rest and that Ridley and his pards were going to hang them as being the abductors.

"And, Isaac, how do you come to be in the mix?" asked Sands, eying the Irishman curiously.

"Sure, an' Oi'm ther bould abductor," answered Ike, with astonishing frankness.

"You are! Well, I'll be dog-goned! It seems to me that for just once in their lives Ridley and his pards weren't so far out. In the name of the sacred grizzly, what were you going to do with the fair damsel? What put you up to such a game?"

"Whist! Sp'ake a little lower. Sure, an' it wor ther major hisself, that paid the hundred cash down; an' why wouldn't Oi be takin' ther contract whin big money wor goin'?"

"The majaw!"

Le Roy Morton uttered the words in a tone of utter astonishment.

"Rock me, Susie, rock me like you used to," hummed Sands. "And so he got you in the snap and then threw off on you? It's what I'd expect of him; but I don't understand what was his little game."

"Sorra wan av me knows, ayther; an' be ther same token Miss Silky couldn't onderstand it at all, at all. But ther murtherin' thafe av ther world tuk a sittin' shot at me as I brung her in, an' then ther owld Frinchmon kim. It's ther leddy herself O'll ask to explain it whin Oi say her. But onyhow they all went off ter-gither, thick as thaves, pavin' me wid a ball in me brist. Bad luck ter them, it's a foul game that's bin played on a jontleman an' schoolar, an' if Oi don't go ter git aven yer kin call me a Dootch nagur."

"Very singular affair, Isaac. Do you know of any particular reason why our friend Martie should yearn to have your neck elongated?"

"An' phot's ther m'anin' av that. It's Greek ter me, an' I niver got further than Hebrew."

"Had Martie anything in for you that he wanted a chance to kill you off without giving you a show to talk? Confound you, if I didn't smell a mystery I'd take hold of the rope myself."

"It's a horrud quisthion to answir, but Oi belave he thought I wer' wan av ther owld Hair-pins. That wer' how he came ter offer me ther job."

"Hair-pins, aw!" interposed Morton. "There's such a gang awound Bumble's Bar. Wondaw if it's the same? It would be stwange if Hawton was wight."

Muldoon shook his head, to indicate that he knew nothing of the Hair-pins of Bumble's Bar, and then added:

"Av coorse he worn't far wrong; but that war long ago, an' Oi'm done wid all such foolishness."

"If a man looks long enough he can generally see through a stone wall. He thought you were an inconvenient sort of a man to have around loose and wanted to get you out of the way in a style that wouldn't leave too much room to have ugly questions asked. But, don't you forget it, he will be after you with a sharp stick. You've got to die now, or skip the camp."

Charley spoke very seriously; but the Irishman did not seem to be much troubled.

"Oi made it roight wid the leddy afoorhand, an' ther rist don't count. Now mebbe you'll be after lookin' at ther wound he made in me soide. It fales as though Oi couldn't go much further."

"Bless your soul! so you're really hit! Let me have a sight at the place. It can't be anything serious or it would have stopped you long ago. What are you going to do about the major? He or you will have to go under if he runs the game out on the same level he's begun."

"Sure, an' Oi'll sthick to ther hotel Muldoon an' run me chances. Av he says a worrud Oi'm sure ther young leddy will say me out. It's not loikely he'd be thyrin' his hand on me av Oi git back safe."

"It's likely that if he can't hang you he'll do the next best thing and shoot you. Walk circumspectly, Isaac, or there will be a dead landlord. This shooting, by the way, hasn't amounted to much—more blood and scare than solid business—but you'll be a little sore for a day or two, and your dug-out won't be just the safest place in the world."

"Niver yez moinde. It's there Oi'm goin' av Oi kin foind ther way, an' av ther murtherin' thafe comes nigh enough Oi'll plant him, sure."

"It's a long walk and you're bitter to go on crutches; but I guess we can make it before midnight. The orchestra of the Lame Eagle will be short a member or two, but it's not permanent, and to-morrow will wake up the town."

CHAPTER XVII.

A VAIN APPEAL.

THE return of Selka and her friends to the Gulch, as has already been stated, created considerable excitement; and if the crowd at the Lame Eagle had been permitted to have their own way, that young lady would have delivered a lecture from the little platform, that served as a stage.

There was a movement toward starting a call at our time; but Jean checked it decidedly and at once.

"It is ze impossible. Ze young lady, she is wiz her mozzer who very sick has been since she hear ze daughter in danger has been. She cannot leave her and as gentlemen zere would be noone here zat would consent. If zere was ze rest would attend to his case."

Putting it that way Jean had about three to one in his favor and there was no trouble about the weakness of the orchestra, for which he did not think it necessary to apologize.

It might have proved a more difficult task to produce Selka than Jean Lafitte suspected, if her presence had been insisted on; though he told no more than the truth as he knew it.

Elsie had been seized with one of her nervous attacks, and it was the very worst one she had had for years. When she came out of her faint after the reappearance of Selka, Jean left her in the hands of her daughter, requesting that he be sent for if needed. Of what followed he knew nothing.

Selka had kept to herself the strange adventure upon which she had decided to embark, as well as the proposal that Major Martle had made the day of her adventure at the ford; but after her rescue she had decided to tell her mother all, and seek to gain further information. The story of the previous Sabbath had made a deep impression, and now she began to think of numerous things concerning which to question Elsie. Since the flood-gates of confidence had once been opened she could hardly refuse to answer her fully.

But Elsie was in no condition for questioning when she opened her eyes and stared wildly around. It was fully an hour until she spoke her first coherent words. At first she drew Selka toward her, stroked her hair, and sobbed, with now and then an exclamation of sorrow or fear—or broken words that the girl did not understand at all.

But by-and-by she grew calmer, and still holding Selka tightly, insisted on being told everything.

"Fear not," she added. "I am myself again and it can do me no harm. There may be something that only I can explain."

To begin, Selka, after vainly trying to induce her to wait until in a calmer mood, placed in her mother's hand the letter that had originally taken her to Muldoon's claim.

She half-fared that the mention then of her murdered father might cause another outburst; but she was mistaken. Elsie read it over quite calmly, though there was a little compression of her lips that told how strongly she was affected.

"And you went to meet this man, but found it was all a lie? That might you have known. Who is there here that has heard of us in those years, long ago?"

"I am not so certain. It all seems very strange, but I am not half as grateful for my rescue, as I suppose I ought to be. If these parties knew nothing of the past why should this letter speak of my murdered father? Oh, I would go through a thousand times more danger to come face to face with the writer of this, to whom the man who carried me off promised to take me!"

Selka, you are mad—madder than ever I was when my poor brain went crazed from fright and suffering. How was it then that Jean found you, and what became of him who would have carried you away?"

In a few words she told how Major Martle had suddenly put in an appearance, and shot to kill. How it was done she knew not, but she believed the abductor had made his escape, since no trace of him had been found. She also told her the brief conversation she had with the major while he rode near her.

"But why came he not with you? I would thank him on my knees for saving you. Girl! girl! you know not the risks you run!"

"Risks that perhaps were not so great as they seemed. I tell you that I went willingly; that the man employed to do the actual work was more than half my friend, and I firmly believe would not have undertaken it if he had thought I would have come to harm; and that at any time I could have protected myself with this."

She drew from her breast as she spoke a small, delicately mounted revolver. The ball that it carried might not have been heavy enough to stop, on the instant, a mad rush, but it was large enough, if well-aimed, to do deadly work.

"There is another thing, mother. I have not told you because I thought the advice he gave me might be well enough, and that to know it would only excite you. A few days ago this Major Martle—a man I had seen not half a dozen times—asked me to marry him. When I refused—as of course I did—he said something that was very like a threat."

"And you said nothing of this to me, oh, my child! Too young art thou to think or hear of love and marriage. Perhaps he did but jest."

"Not so young as I seem to you, poor mother; and it was no jest; I could see that the man was in very great earnest. Why? Would a man like he care to force a girl to become his wife unless there was some reason for it? I have been thinking of this, mother, and I begin to believe that there are stranger things to be told than even the story you confided to me. Who am I? Who was my father? Except his name, which, years ago I learned by chance, I know nothing of him. Why this mystery? Must I go out into the world and ask every one I meet 'Who was Francois Dupin?'"

"Hush, hush! my child. Alas, you have heard too much already. I dare not answer your questions—if I did it would do you no good."

"I have indeed heard too much—unless I hear it all. To know the rest may not make me happier; but it may save me from the very depths of woe. Better to tell me the worst, whatever it may be than have me imagining a thousand things, all of them wide of the mark, and running a thousand risks to gain information that may be, miles wide of the truth. Why is it, for instance, that you never speak the name of Francois Dupin—my father?"

She recognized the weakness of her mother, and, cruel though it was, seemed inclined to push her advantage to the utmost.

"Do not ask me; you murder me! I have been so broken this day, so frightened, I am not myself. Perhaps I do not know. Perhaps I could not speak the truth. Give me time so that I can recall all your history—and mine—then I will go over that past again with you. Then—oh, I cannot lose you now! Let us fly from here! Jean, if we but whisper to him that we are in danger, will send us away, and when he has closed his business here will join us. He has been a father to you so many years, why should you ask of any other?"

Elsie spoke wildly; she crouched and quivered. In calmer moments Selka would have been frightened—would have even died before giving her further pain.

But now she was like a stone. The first step had been made, and she would not halt.

"The truth," she repeated, "the truth! Answer me now. When I know it all I will know, too, whether it is best for us to flee, or to face the dangers that you fear. Why, when I know all the truth—if you can tell it to me—there will be no more danger. Come! I will not wait."

"To-morrow?"

"Now!"

"Give me time to think."

"Not a moment. I have the right and I demand to know."

"But it can do you no good. Until I speak what I only know you may be safe—so I have always thought. When you know more others may know more. If that man lives he would follow us to the ends of the earth. Oh, he is a tiger!"

"Let him follow. Tigers have been slain before now. I will slay him as he slew Francois Dupin. I must know now, or you are no mother of mine."

At this last threat Elsie turned deadly pale. She spoke faintly:

"You ask too much. I know but little. I know not, even, that Francois is dead."

Selka gave a great start.

"Not dead! My father not dead!"

"Francois Dupin was not your father," responded Elsie, in a still lower tone, and then fell back once more in a deep swoon.

At this unexpected declaration Selka was so overwhelmed that she did not even notice the grave effect that its utterance had caused. A thousand questions, as it seemed, came rushing to her lips—she had asked a dozen before she realized that for the present at least she could receive no answer.

The condition of Elsie, instead of frightening, calmed her. Looking down at the lips that were set as though they would utter no more, even for death itself, she knew that it would be cruel folly to expect or demand any explanations, and so busied herself trying to revive the senseless woman, who, after a little, gasped and opened her eyes. There was a weary, stubborn look in them.

Then, though the color came back to her lips, they never moved.

Something of regret and shame touched Selka, though she knew were it to be done over she would be just as persistent. Whatever the cost she was asking only what she had a right to know, though there is sometimes a proper knowledge of which one feels ashamed.

"Pardon me, mother," she said. "I will ask you no more now. When you are stronger you will tell me all of your own free will."

Elsie shook her head sadly, placing her fingers to her lips, and then pointing toward her bedroom. Evidently she wished to be alone.

Her strength had come back rapidly, since she was able to walk across the floor with a little assistance. Then Selka left her, but seated herself once more in the outer room, ready to come at a call.

For an hour or so she was in silence and darkness.

Occasionally Elsie sighed or moved, and her regular breathing told that she was in need of no assistance. There was little to divert Selka from her own thoughts. After her mother once slept there was nothing bad she been herself.

The hour was not late. Once in the saloon she could hear the jingle and blare of the music and the crash of voices.

Never had they been so distasteful as now. Ordinarily she did not mind them; to-night she felt as though she must run away from them.

The feeling grew on her. She laughed at herself, and tried to call it nervousness; but the inclination still remained.

Then she thought of the dug-out up the Gulch and wondered if Muldoon had made his escape. She was angry at herself for not having pressed her questions closer home to him.

"Surely he knows more than he told me. He must speak when I see him again—why should I not see him now?"

She rose, threw a hood on her head; felt of her pistol to be sure that it was in the right place, went to the door, looked up and down the street, and finally hurried off in the direction of Ike Muldoon's.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FLOOD IN THE GULCH, AND SELKA IN THE STREAM.

MAJOR MARTLE never allowed any trifles to cause him to alter his plans. He had said he was on his way to the Murphy claim, and as there was nothing in the way to prevent his going there, he went. Selka had her uncle to escort her back to the camp in triumph; and he had left the Dude from Denver in very good hands.

Of course, if Jean Lafitte had not put in an appearance it would have been different; but the major knew how to accept a situation gracefully. Perhaps the gratitude of the family would be brought up to the top notch all the better by his absence.

It was late, then, when he re-entered the Gulch. At last, it was long after dark, and he did not meet on the street a soul that he knew. Everybody was in bed, or at the saloons.

It might be that he expected to have a report from the men he had sent out. He went directly to his office.

Hardly had he seated himself when he had visitors; and he knew their footsteps, even at a distance. Without much ceremony Bart Harrington and his two pards entered.

Bart and the man of peace looked the worse for wear, while Bob Ridley appeared to be under the weather.

"Well?" said the major, looking up.

"We all got away alive," responded Bart, with the tone of a man imparting unexpected information.

"Lightnings blast you! Is that all you've got to tell me?" asked the major fiercely. "What's become of Sands and the dude? Don't be mealy-mouthed. I see you have been showing your hands to each other so you needn't be afraid to talk. And the Irishman? I left him with a rope around his neck, so to speak. Did you bury him or leave him hang? How was it, Ridley?"

"Thar war no funeral that I'm aware of," responded Ridley, meekly.

"Leastwise we didn't see no corpses. You kinder throwed up ther job, an' after you left ther job sorter throwed us up. Take it all 'round we're glad to git hyar livin'. We knowed yer didn't 'spect us to 'come tergether; but the news were sorter heavy ter kerry, one man at er time, an' we thort it would be healthier ef we war all hyar to break it. W'ot one didn't know the rest c'u'd all sw'ar to."

"The long and short of it is, they all got away. Don't mince matters. I can see how Bart and Rakestraw might fail to connect; but what excuse you have is more than I can understand. It takes ten of you to kick a blind cripple, with his hands tied—and I'd lay the long odds on the limpy after all. You're no good, and, by heavens! I believe I'll take the Irishman in on the ground floor, and for the first job set him to cutting your throat. He would get there and don't you forget it. What have you got to say for yourself?"

The major did not raise his voice much above a whisper, and the cold smile on his face deepened, but Bob Ridley looked anxiously at his pards. He knew the speaker of old, and was aware that in former times such white wrath meant shoot. He held up his hands and began to explain.

"Yer see, major, when ther drop's on a man he will sing small ef he don't know nothin' else ter do. It warn't our fault, yer know."

"No, I don't know. Why didn't you hang Muldoon?"

"I dunno ez we could 'a' bung him if we hed 'a' tried; an' ef we hed tried I wouldn't 'a' bin any more use. I'll foller you, major, till the cow's tail drops off; an' ef yer hez a bit ov work you say must be done I'll do it er die a-tryin'. But this hyar—yer kinder left it in our own hands ter do ez we pleased; an' when his pard chipped in with a six in each fist an' him shootin' plumb center every time, we saved our bacon an' left fur home. That's gospel truth, straight ez a string, an' yer kin interview Bart an' Billy ez ter how he happened to be thar—this same Mister Sands."

The major turned on Billy a furious look, and Rakestraw took up the thread of talk.

"Yer kinder hinted thet it would suit yer hand ef Sands war got out of ther way fur a time, an' thet he'd be in ther neighborhood ov Uncle Johnny's claim this A. M. We war thar, willin' an' anxious—an' so war he. Thar he war, a-hidin' behind a rock when we got thar. We c'u'd jest see ther top ov his hat, an' ther muzzle ov his Winchester. 'Twould 'a' done you good ter hev seen us crawl fur that rock."

"Finally, we riz right at it, Bart a-swingin' his lass' rope, an' me a-handlin' my shooters. Oh, we hed him foul, I tell yer. Then we heered a small, still voice a-sayin', 'Duz you fellers live near around hyar?'"

"Blame him! He wasn't thar at all. He'd bin a-crawlin' after us, an' hed us both kivered."

"I know a gun when I see it, an' ez he axed us to throw up our hands, up mine went."

"I war ther nearer, yer see, an' I thort it might give Bart a chance ter pull his six ef I destracted his intenshuns a bit. Bart thort so too, an' tried it on. I'd a-laffed ef I'd 'a' died fur

it. Lordy! Yer orter seen Bart drop that gun an' shake his fingers when that feller's shooter cracked. Blame me, if he didn't scrape him on ther crazy bone! Then, afore I knowed what he war up to, he jumped in an' slugged Bart under ther jaw.

"Now," sez he, lookin' at me, 'what der you want?"

"I'm a man ov peace," sez I 'an' I wants ter go home."

"Drop yer irons," sez he, an' I dropped 'em.

"Bart, he was sound asleep, so he took his belt an' mine."

"Now," sez he, 'you kin soak yer pard's head in a leetle ov that benzine, an' when he gits 'round both ov yer go, soon ez yer like.' An' while I war tryin' ter think up some way ter git ther bulge on him he kicked up my heels an' laid me out 'longside ov Bart, an' then follered on after that dude pard ov bissen thet hed went a-hurryin' by 'thout gittin' even a glimp' ov ther fun. An' hyar we be."

"Ready ter pick ther flints an' try it ag'in," added Bart.

"Ov course, onless yer sez so, we ain't goin' ter let it rest hyar. Next time thar won't be no mistake made, ef ther band hez ter strike up in ther middle ov Ground Hog."

"Your men have learned how to talk, and forgotten everything else," said the major, slowly.

"What became of them all after they had cleaned you out? I suppose they are scarcely biding in the mountains, even if Muldoon does not dare show his face here again."

"Oh, we kept an eye on 'em, ov course. You'll find 'em all at Ike's dug-out—an' ther dam's full ter b'ilin' over."

Billy's eyes met those of the major as he made the last part of his statement. There was something in it that did not show on the surface, and he wanted to see how it was received.

"You are good for something, after all. The game is treed, and, as you say, in some danger. It would be a pity to see them go that way, and yet, somehow, I am pretty certain those men are elected for sudden death. It's a pleasant evening, and I have half a notion to walk out to the dam myself, and see how it is. Perhaps you gentlemen could find a pick or shovel somewhere, and would like to walk along. I see you are heeled again."

"We'll go erlong, fur sure; but our time's wu'th suthin', ain't it, now?"

Billy Rakestraw put the question, but all three were anxiously awaiting the answer.

"You know what it's worth. I've advanced you a good round sum already, and what you've done so far don't count. I've got to take hold of the work myself, and finish it up in a different style from the one I counted on. When I get done, I'll give you just what you were to have when you took the contract. After that, if there's any kicking or sign of a leak, you can look out for a specie payment not down in the specifications. I have been letting you gibe a little, and now and then kick over the traces, if you wanted. That's your play. But when it comes to work, I'll hold you there or sink a lead shaft and do without the precious metals."

"Major, yer do us proud with yer confidence. We're ready and waiting; lead on!"

"In a moment," answered Martle, as he turned to a small closet and took out a few articles.

There were but a few seconds of time lost, and as he carelessly threw on the things, no one would have suspected that he was disguising himself, though at the distance of a few rods no one would have suspected his identity.

From the rear of the office it was easy to reach a back street but little used, and yet enough of a thoroughfare not to have their presence particularly noticeable. It was not very likely that they would be seen, and the trail that served as an extension of the street led right on out to the dam.

They went very quietly, and saw no one on the way.

"I've had my eye on this thing for some time," said the major, as they came to a halt, "and looked at it again from a distance as I came home to-night. Something has been going on up in the mountains, and there is a heap of water coming down. It was bound to come some day, and I have often wondered that Ike was such a fool as to put his dug-out in such a dangerous place. There's not another man in Ground Hog would risk it."

"Kerrect you be. Ef that water goes a-b'ilin' down ther gulch, ez it looks mighty much ez though it would, yer couldn't find whar ther lay-out stood to-morrer mornin'. An' ez fur Ike, he'd be nowhar."

"The weak spot seems to be about there," continued the major.

"Supposing you take the pick, Bart, and see whether you think the bank is safe."

"Mebbe we had better go an' warn 'em," said Bart, as he shouldered the pick.

"When a feller goes ter fixin' 'round sich a fence he's blamed apt ter make a mistake an' do more hurt than good."

"You're wasting time. If the dam breaks you'd be too late to save him anyhow, and I guess he can be trusted to look after himself.

No more nonsense; but solid work, and get it in quick."

Down the gulch there was a stiff wind blowing, and the water of Ground Hog River was coming before it in an unprecedented volume. Selka would have found some trouble and plenty of danger in crossing at the ford now. Still there were few of the inhabitants of the camp that feared for the safety of the dam. Perhaps it would have stood for years if the elements of nature had been left to work their way, unassisted.

The major had a keener eye than the most, however, and he had studied out the weak spot. Bart's pick rose and fell a few times; and Bob Ridley, who handled a spade, worked with more energy than he ever showed in his claim.

With a great lap a wave of water went into the gully that the two men had made.

The greater part of it washed back with the recoil; but some of it went over the bank, cutting as it went.

Then another wave that went tumbling down the breast in a thin cascade.

"Too late, boys! All Ground Hog couldn't stop it now if they were here and trying. We had better follow on down the high ground, and see if we can roust Muldoon out."

The words said one thing; the tone they were said in meant another. If Muldoon escaped it would be through no warning of theirs.

But down along the high ridge above the Gulch went the four men, until they stood almost above the dug-out. Not a sound did they make as they crouched there, looking down on the trail that was lit up by the clear rays of the moon that came slanting down the Gulch. Half an hour sooner or later and it would have lain in impenetrable darkness.

"Ther water are comin'," said Ridley, turning toward the dam, "an' I reckon it'll start with a whoop. I think I c'd drop a man ez stood down thar—mebbe, ef one kin out, you'd like ter see me try?"

"No! on your life, no!" said the major quickly, catching the hand of the desperado.

"There must be nothing of that. Corpses are sometimes found, and there would be ugly questions. Hark! Hear the roar! They have not taken the alarm and the water's coming. The flood will do the work."

Escape now seemed out of the question. A horse could not outrun the flood and reach the road that led up to Ground Hog in time. If Ike Muldoon and his pards were in the dug-out their doom seemed sealed.

And then, on the trail below, there arose, clear and high, a woman's scream.

"Heavens!" exclaimed the major. "There, there! It is Selka Dupin! She is lost!"

And then the door of the dug-out swung open and a man rushed up and out, running straight toward Selka, just in advance of the first of three great waves that rolled down the canyon, each higher than the one in its front, and all with a face straight as a wall.

CHAPTER XIX.

ELSIE SPEAKS THE NAME.

"SAY, pardy, the major's a mighty bad one ter hev it in fur a gerloot. We'll hev ter walk straight er ther' may be another flood. Ez a man ov peace I'm gittin' kinder skeered."

Billy Rakestraw was the only man that uttered a word after that cry of the major. He whispered his opinions in the ear of Bob Ridley, but they did not interest him. His attention was all taken up with what was transpiring below.

A glance showed them that the man was not Muldoon, and that he was running not so much to outstrip the flood for himself as to reach Selka. The waters came on like a racehorse; but he ran like the wind.

With a dozen bounds he was by her side, with his arm around her. Then, looking over his shoulder, he saw the dug-out disappear under a dozen feet of water. It was too late to seek refuge then, and the stone wall of the Gulch seemed to hold them in a death-gripe. An older man in the mountains would have said that they were lost.

But Le Roy Morton never halted, nor did his courage falter. That one glance was sufficient to show him that there was no going back, and without pause he rushed on, carrying Selka with him, though in an instant she was on her feet again, and running by his side, while he held her hand in his.

Martle watched with breathless eagerness. The presence of Selka, utterly inexplicable as it seemed to him, changed his sympathies. Whatever might happen to him hereafter, he wanted the man from Denver to escape now. When he saw the two for a little actually hold their own, he uttered a faint cheer, and in his excitement clapped his hands without knowing it.

Then the wall of water came down on them, swept them away, swallowed them up, the other waves followed, and the major stood staring blankly at the hurrying, rushing stream, that was flowing at his very feet.

With a deep breath he turned away, his heels after him, none of them at first speaking a word.

"I'd have given a thousand dollars to have

known beforehand how this thing was going to turn out. Who would have ever dreamed of that girl being there? And what in the name of Heaven was she doing? She must have gone mad. Of course, boys, after this we want to keep a close mouth about what we were doing to-night. To say nothing at all is better than a dozen lies about a thing. There's a couple shanties that the flood may shake up, but I think it will spread out below so much that it will do no great damage. We had better separate now and try to get into town before they know what has happened. I think we can do it, though the news will travel fast enough. If you should meet any one, just be out of breath. Say you came in from a prospect toward Kerly's Fork, and that you are going on to tell what has happened."

"All right, major. You hunt cover an' we'll take keer ov ourselves. We ken hunt a hole fast enough. An' I guess yer knows we ain't ther talkin' kind er yer wouldn't 'a' hed us along ez pards, so long."

Bart spoke for the three, and with a wave of the hand led the way, following the edge of the bluff, while Martle, secure in his semi-disguise, took the nearest route to camp.

"All bu'ted up, ain't he, Bob? Sing'lar how a man like him kin lose his grip," said Bart, in a low tone, as soon as they were fairly out of hearing, and casting a long glance after the vanishing figure.

"Yaas; an' I reckon we know now jest who war ther woman in ther case. Won't be ser much chance fur fat jobs ef she's gone up ther flume. Tough, ain't it? I kinder cottoned to ther gal meself."

"Mebbe you ain't ez blamed big fool ez ther major, then. I ain't keerin' fur ther gal, but I heered him a-whisperin' suthin' 'bout a thousand dollars. That war drawin' it strong, in course, but I reckon he'd give part ov that pile ter hev ther gal safe out ov ther drink."

"That's so. But—"

"But yer can't git her goin' off ter h'iste in benzine at ther Lame Eagle, er yit a-standin' hyar, wishin' fur luck. Thar's jest a chance we'll find 'em hung up somewhar erlong ther bank. Ef you gerloots wants ter come in on that put it's ready ter open. I'm a-bettin' on it, anyhow."

And Bart wheeled abruptly and pursued his way along the bank, followed by his two companions. It was only a chance, and the barest kind of a one at that, but there was nothing to lose; and if they "hit the turn," there would no doubt be big money in it for the pards.

At a point not fifty yards from where they had been standing, and right where the trail to the camp took a short turn, the bluff made a sudden dip. Beyond that the gulch rapidly widened, so that the water no longer confined would soon spread out, and the greater part of the danger be a thing of the past.

But before that there were cruel rocks to mangle, and it seemed that no human being could be swept along in that mad race and live.

Yet there is a chance for 'most anything in this world when luck is running. Hastening on, peering downward from time to time, went the three men.

"Hold hard, pards!" exclaimed Billy Rakestraw, who was the last in the line.

"Yander! What's that shadder? 'Pears ter me we've got 'em!"

Luck was running, sure.

Just when the line of the now rapidly shallow-ing water had run along the nearer bank, the short stump of a tree projected from the wall of the gulch.

They all knew the spot well enough, and noted an unfamiliar look about it.

A second glance and they understood.

Never had Morton's gripe on Selka relaxed, but when the water struck them he had flung his arms around her waist, and they were swept away together.

Now here, now there, they were tossed, like feathers in a gale. The strongest swimmer then would have been utterly at the mercy of the waves.

Le Roy Morton felt all this, and yet did not altogether despair. As cool as the coolest he tried to keep his head above water. By so doing he might save Selka too, since he had drawn her cheek against his own, and sought to keep his shoulder to the front to first receive any shock that might come.

And it came soon enough. All this passed almost with the rapidity of thought, and before Major Martle had turned away toward the camp, Le Roy had felt a great crash, and then knew no more. The water had flung him hard against the gnarled stump and left him there, evenly balanced and still clutching Selka.

"Right you are, Billy, don't git excited," muttered Bart, recognizing that a human being had lodged below.

"We kin git to 'em ef we take it easy, an' ther water's goin' down every minnit. Ef they're dead they're dead; an' ef they're livin', a leetle time won't count half ez much ez break-in' a neck tryin' ter rush ther n corners."

"We kin git down to ther trail an' foller ther water down; it ain't deep ernough ter hurt. It's ther quickest thing up an' over that I ever

see'd. I'm afeard they're corpses, but I guess ther boss 'll stand suthin' handsome ef we bring 'em in ter camp; an' we kin hit ther Frenchman 'ith a heap ov drinks, an' mebbe some coin."

When they came to the spot there seemed no life or motion in the young man, but he held on to Selka with a vise-like clutch. It was only his gripe that kept her from being swept on down. It was hard to loosen his hold—and the men did not try to do it with any particular gentleness.

"Hez she passed in her checks?" asked Billy with considerable eagerness.

"Nary check. Sound in wind, limb and bottom, er I'm the boss liar from 'way-back. Jest wait now tell I try ther patent death extractor, an' you'll hear her snort."

As he spoke, Bart thrust the neck of the flask he carried between her lips, and tilted the bottle up with no sparing hand.

The burning liquid did its work speedily and well. Selka coughed, muttered a few words, and then began to revive in earnest, though by the time she had thoroughly recovered her senses she was being carried rapidly away in the direction of the town.

It was a very close thing that Morton was not knocked in the head before the trio took their departure. Bart looked back after him, and in the glance was all the hate that had been so rapidly growing.

"Blame it! Why can't the boss say jest what he wants with ther dude? It'd be easy ter wipe him out now, an' ef he gits 'round ag'in he'll be orfully in ther way ef I knows ary thing about gal's flesh. But mebbe that'd be jest prezactly what warn't right. I don't guess I'll reesk it this time."

At the dwelling of Jean Lafitte, the absence of Selka had not been known. The hour was growing late, and the concert at the Lame Eagle was over, when there was a cry in the camp, followed by a general uproar.

Jean, stepping outside at the first sounds, was confronted by two men, who carried between them a limp and dripping form.

"What, what is zis?" he exclaimed, moving forward, though he had not yet recognized or thought of his niece.

"Blazes are ter pay down in ther gulch. Reckon thar's bin a cloudburst up in ther mountings, fur it's brimful an' sloppin' over, an' we fished this hyar gal ov yourn outen the drink. Whar shell we Kerry her in? She's a-livin', but it's bin a mighty close squeak."

Jean was amazed.

At first he could not realize that this could possibly be true. After the trial and danger of the day, he was certain that the girl would be resting quietly in her bed. A look at the dripping girl satisfied him. Without question he led the way around the corner and into the house. The two pards had made a chain with their hands, and were carrying her so easily that Lafitte did not attempt to take her from them.

The noise made by their entrance aroused Elsie, who came flying from her room, giving a great scream when she first saw the dripping girl. Her first thought was that Selka had attempted to commit suicide. She knew how wild the conversation had driven her, and judged the girl by herself.

"My girl! my girl!" she cried, casting her arms around her.

"Forgive me and I will tell you all; but you must promise never to leave me, no matter what happens. After all these years I cannot lose you."

"But what does zis mean? Has ze girl gone clean crazie? I s'all keep her in ze house now until I can send her to ze city. By day and by night she wandair out of ze dangair regardless. I will have it no more. By herself she goes not out again alone. And for zese gentlemen I will reward zem. Look after ze girl, and see zat she is revived. I will see what is the maitair in ze Gulch."

Hardly had the men left the room when a striking change took place in the young girl's manner. All her strength came back to her.

"I love you, darling mother! You break my heart when you hint that I could leave you. And yet—I must know the truth. I sought the Gulch to-night to see if that man could tell me aught, but he is lost. I ask you once more—who was my father?"

"You shall not ask me in vain. When you are stronger I will tell you all that you do not yet know; but give me a little time, I have kept the secret so long. Your safety, your life may depend on it. Your father's name was Horton Graunt. Will not that suffice you for to-night?"

"Horton Graunt! That is enough for the present. I will remember it."

CHAPTER XX.

THE MARSHAL FROM BUMBLE'S BAR TAKES A HAND.

THE tough citizens had hardly departed with their load when Ike Muldoon and Charley Sands came down the gulch, dry shod, except for the pools and puddles that had been left behind; and very much alive.

They were prying and peering in every direction, and seemed not altogether hopeless.

"It don't s'ame, now, thet ther b'ye sh'd go over ther range all along av his thryin' ter help ther leddy. It wad make me quistion ther dispinsashun av providence, which Oi say it's gineraly ther roight man that hands in' whin it's a purely providential stroke. An' Oi'll gamble me dug-out wid all ther modern improvements ag'in' any bank in 'Frisco thet thay're roight side up wid care."

"Hope you're a true prophet, Isaac. He's a nery fellow in spite of his ways, and I'd hate to lose him for a pard. Of course one couldn't blame him for running his chances to save a girl; but I'm afraid the girl wasn't there. I didn't hear her if we have his word for it that he did. Fact is, I was too busy climbing up the stairs and the chimney, to get to the cave in the rocks, to hear anything. But he did jump everlasting quick."

"Whist, yespalpeen! Oi hear ther b'ye now. Hearken!"

A low moan broke on their ears, coming from the side of the gulch. Le Roy Morton was just recovering his senses; and he at once made himself heard.

The two darted to the spot.

The dude was all abroad as yet, and unable to move. The blow from the root had so nearly done its work that a single, swinging hit from Bart Harrington would have finished his earthly career.

"Lift him up jintly an' take him back to ther palace Muldoon. It's ther mountain dew that he's n'adin' now, an' be ther same token ther's a joogful at ther hotel. Oi don't say nothin' av ther leddy, an' I guess it wor a big mishtake, but he's a-livin', an' Oi'll bring him 'round az sure az Oi'm a jontlemon an' scholar."

The two, with a promptness equal to that of Bart and his pards, lifted Morton up, and staggered off with him in the direction of the dug-out.

"Sure, he's built from ther ground up, an' solid az rocks," said Muldoon. "Oi niver seen sich a dec'avin' wretch. He weighs a ton."

"Right you are. They don't make 'em much better for his size. I want to hear how he got away, and if he saw anything of Selka. If he had got hold of her once the two would have been together now. Hurry along ther procession."

The easiest part of the task was to convey him to the dug-out. After that came the labor of lifting him up the passageway by which they had made their escape. The stairway was rude and narrow. More than once they came nigh to an ugly tumble.

The ascent was made at last, a small cave being reached, which Isaac had provided as a place of refuge, not only against the waters of the gulch, for which he had a more wholesome respect than he had let on, but also against any flood of human beings who might seek him to ask impertinent questions.

Morton was not seriously damaged in the way of broken bones, but he recovered slowly. After awhile he was able to answer a few questions.

"Theah! Of cawse she was theab. But whah is she now? Didn't yaw fellows look? Why didn't yaw let me lie and hunt for her? I was all wight, and it may be the death of her. Go, quick! wun! If you desert her, I swear I'll make this old hole a charnel-house as soon as I can hold my derringer. What are yaw gaping at? I tell yaw, I'm all wight. Are yaw going?"

"Don't worry so, old man. I guess she got away right side up. If she hadn't, we would have seen something of her. Ike will stay here and look after you, and I will go and see if I can find out where she went to."

Charley spoke soothingly, for Morton was wild with excitement.

"Go, then, and don'tchaw come back without news. If yaw're not back in half an hour, I'll go myself."

Sands had very little idea that he could help the girl if she had really been in the gulch; but he intended to see Jean Lafitte, and find out from him where Selka was. He took his departure without delay, and his going calmed Morton at once. Muldoon dosed him liberally with whisky, examined him for any sign of serious internal injury, threw in a few hopeful remarks, and was finally gratified by seeing him drop into a doze.

"Ther b'ye'll be roight afour to-morry. He's more throubled than hurt, an' av Charley brings ther good news, he'll fale foine az ther mournin' sthar."

The absence of Sands was prolonged, but hardly noticed, since Morton slept and Muldoon dozed. When he came in his face wore a puzzled look. His entrance, lightly though he stepped, awakened the sleepers, and Morton started up as though he had never been hurt.

"Well, aw! Whatchaw heah?"

"The girl is alive, safely back at Jean Lafitte's, and more frightened than hurt, if all accounts are correct. She was carried in by two of the gang that has been bucking against us—Bart Harrington and his pard Billy Rakestraw. They must have been prowling around here, and after no good, you can bet. Say they found her in the gulch, but don't mention our

young friend here at all. Don't exactly see how they could have missed him, and I suspect they laid him out to die just where we found him. And the gallant major don't seem to figure in the matter at all."

Morton gave a sigh of relief and settled back perfectly content, while Charley continued:

"There's been a big bullabaloo in the camp, and about every able-bodied man has gone up to the dam to see how the thing worked. They'd be fishing for corpses down-stairs if I hadn't spread the news that we weren't in when the waves rolled by. I had to dodge a gang of 'em that were prowling around as it was. If there wasn't such a general mux there I'd suggest that we move down."

"It's purty well tored up, that's a fact," admitted Muldoon, "but we kin rig it up to-morry ag'in. It's built ch'ape, ther furnit' hoor won't shpoil, an' we kin have it good az new. Now it's shlape in good airnist, an' ther spalpeens kin prow round to ther heart's contint. Av ther's noboddy drowned, sure ther balance don't count."

"But Cholly, me boy, how did it happen? Who blew up the dam? It wa'n't the safest in a flood; but it wouldn't go ov itself, aw."

"You've got onto the mystery, first clatter; but I agree with Isaac. We'll sleep now, and hunt up the case in the morning. If Martie, though, wanted to clean us all up at one sweep, he couldn't on the face of things, hit on a neater way, I'll dream that he did and charge him up with another. The balance against him is getting healthy."

Although, as Charley Sands had said, the greater part of the Gulch population went down to view, by moonlight, the scene of the disaster there were a good many visitors the following morning. They found Muldoon and his boarders at work, repairing the dug-out, which was not as seriously shattered as might have been expected. The trend of the canyon had turned the force of the current so that it did not strike the shanty directly, though, for some minutes, it had been entirely under water. No chance for escape would there have been had the waves caught Muldoon sleeping.

Up at the dam there were no signs to show that the hand of man had been at work, and the work had been more complete than the major had counted on. When the spectators viewed the ruins, and from them judged how the whole structure had held together, the only wonder was that it had not gone sooner. There was also some lamentation over the destruction of the "ford." It was some miles to another crossing place, and the stage route would be lengthened by twice that distance.

At the Lame Eagle that night the crowd was simply immense, and as the orchestra were all there, and every visitor had brought his buckskin along, things went around on wheels. Morton and Sands came a little earlier than was necessary; but if the former had any hope of thereby meeting Selka he was doomed to disappointment. The dwelling-house of Jean Lafitte was all dark, as far as could be seen from the outside, and Jean himself was reticent.

"It is too mooch, gentlemen. Of it I do not wish to talk. The foolish girl once more was in ze great dangaire, and Elsie zis whole day has been at ze point of death wiz ze fevaire. I have zem removed so zat ze noise may not trouble zem, and ze girl s'all watch her mozzar until she have recovaire, zen zay both go away. Zis is no place for zem. It is no longaire necessary zat I run ze Lame Eagle, and I s'all sell out."

It seemed to be plain that Jean knew nothing of what had really transpired at the Gulch, or of the part that Morton had taken. Once started he said a little more than he had intended, for he closed the conversation abruptly by adding:

"Zis is to you alone. To no one else would I say a word, not a whispaire. See zat you keep silent."

Then he bustled away, leaving the two to arrange the evening's programme with Herr Stein and his sister who had just arrived.

Morton was the chief feature, and they used him for what he was worth. He was down for three or four solos; and he was to chime in on all the pieces the orchestra had been playing since they were first organized. With the variations he could put in, half the audience would not recognize them; and the balance would only say encore.

So Charley Sands reasoned.

"We'll make 'em up, old boy, and if Bart and his pards don't try a sitting shot at us—as I'm half expecting they will—you can stake coin that old Rome will howl with delight."

"But if they do shoot, aw?" queried Morton, with much earnestness.

"Then I'll shoot back. If you can't pick your man in the crowd you'd better leave that part of the contract for me to carry out. If you can, sure, take any one of the three, Burt, Billy, or Bob. You can't go wrong. And if I get a chance at the major, blame me if I believe I'll hold on. I've an idea that he's the worst man of the bunch, though he don't seem to stand up in the front line. But let them begin it. They're big dogs in the kennel to-night, after what they have done. Jean just carries them on his hands;

and, if you notice, whisky is free for them at the bar. I don't believe the girl has told about your share in the rescue. If she had, Jean would be slopping over with gratitude."

"Funny, aw, the girl has not told the sha'h ov Muldoon in the abduction. Pity the Iwishman won't tell the whole twnth."

"Don't fret yourself about Isaac. He's all right. There goes the bell for the grand overture. If anything is going to happen it will be apt to develop right now."

But nothing did develop. The reappearance of Sands and the signor was greeted with applause, while the overture was as well received as could be desired.

When it was over, and they had all filed off of the stage, Morton saw that Selka was standing in the doorway that led to the dwelling-house.

She beckoned to him, and in a moment he was at her side.

She took his hand.

"Again I must thank you for saving my life. This time I know that there is no mistake, since you certainly risked your own. Without me you might have outrun the flood altogether. And I know that it was your arm that held me suspended above the torrent. My consciousness did not desert me until after the shock. Yet I have said nothing of you lest I might make those men more your enemies than ever. I would have sought you this morning could I have left my mother; but she seemed to be very near to death's door at times, so overcome was she with suspense and excitement. It was all my fault, and so I could not leave her. Now, I thank you; from my heart I thank you."

"Doan't mentiyun it, please; it's of no consequence, doan'tchaw know? It's weally an ewwy-day occurrence. But foah you, doan'tchaw know, I'd have done something moah than awdinary if I'd had the chance. I'm sowy to heah yawr mother is ill, foah I would like, aw, to have a little conversation with her. Pwehaps I could tell her and you something surpwisin'."

He ceased speaking suddenly, and Selka gave a little start.

Three men had pushed their way out from the bar-room, the foremost laying his hand heavily on Morton's shoulder, while he spoke in a deep, gruff voice:

"Don't try any nonsense, my man. My pards have yer covered. We know you for a desp'rit character, and the fu't move fur weapons we blow yer cold. In ther name ov ther law, ye'r' my meat."

"What nonsense is this?" asked Le Roy, promptly holding up his hands, since he felt a pistol-barrel against his heart and another against his lungs, as a man on either side covered him.

"What is the chawge?"

"Murder, my boy, and a very bad case it is. Ye'r' charged with killin' a man by ther name ov Horton Graunt, and I reckon you'll climb a tree, sure."

There was a scream from Selka, whose ears had clearly caught the name, and she staggered back and grasped at the door-frame, where she clung staring at the prisoner, her eyes full of horror.

CHAPTER XXI.

SKIPPED BY THE LIGHT OF THE MOON.

"BUT, aw, see heah," began the dude.

"Come out ov ther dark ef yer wants ter chin. When a man hes two chances ter talk I allus want him ter hev his say out; but I want it did whar he ain't ther show ter come slip jack, an' hev me an' my pards git left. I tell yer, I allus keep my eyes open, an' when I on't freezes on ter my man I brings him in, dead or alive. Thet's what's ther matter with me, an' I'm Solid Pete, the Marshal ov Bumble's Bar."

Without the least consideration the three men forced him along, two with drawn revolvers, while the third kept his gripe, just where it had first fallen.

Once in the saloon proper they halted at the bar.

"Now that ther job's done we don't want ter crowd yer. We ain't too tony ter drink with yer, an' ef yer sez so we kin hev a real sosahable time on ther way back. It's all pure biz, yer understand. We hez ter do our duty, but we ain't a-doin' anything more."

Before Morton had time to answer, Charley Sands ruffled up. He had his hands in the side-pockets of his coat, and there was a look of resolution on his generally sunshiny face.

"See here, my friends, ain't you slingin' a heap of style fer kids away from home? You'll find the Gulch as square a camp fer a stranger as there is this side of the briny. But it does hate to see too many frills. Hands on the board now. What's this about my pard?"

Solid Pete turned at the sound of the voice, and looked the speaker over. Then he answered, and the knot of bystanders that had already become interested in the proceedings noted that his tone became thoroughly respectful.

"Very sorry ter tramp on anybody's toes, but ez I war jest a-sayin', it's all pure biz. This hyer gent come ter Bumble's Bar with a gent what war loaded with coin, hung 'round him

fur a couple ov days, an' then jest climbed him fur his rocks. That's what it looks like up our way, an' we're neardest to ther stiff. We got on his trail, an' we're goin ter run him in. Meh-be you'd like ter go 'long back with him. He'll need a friend awful bad when he git's there; but they'll give him a clean show for his white alley. Ef it kin be proved thet he didn't take ther trip the boys 'll chip in regardless, an' send him back hyer rejoicin'. Oh, we're white up thar, an' it all goes plumb to ther line."

"That sounds sweet as new cream; but I've seen how such things run, and I guess we'd better have a little preliminary examination right here. Where's your papers for all this?"

"Oh, we've got 'em, sure ernuf. I'm jest solid old law an' order, an' when I go fur a man I hez my reasons in my pocket. Clap yer eyes outer that, an' you'll see that it's all ship-shape, an' no mistake."

The marshal drew from his breast-pocket a legal-looking document, and extended it toward Sands.

"Thanks; but somebody else read it. I've got both hands full holding the drop on you fellows, and I don't want to be switched off from the main issue."

"Sharp ez rats, you be; but that's right ernuf. You never kin tell ef it's a brace game till yer hev broke ther bank. Hyer, you. Will yer please read this dockymnt ter this gentleman? Guess he'll take your word fur it, but he's a-kickin' at mine."

The person addressed was Major Martle, who, for the first time in a long while, had made his appearance at the Lame Eagle.

The major took the paper and spread it out, in a clear, distinct voice reading its contents. It was a warrant in due form for the arrest of Le Roy H. Morton, charged with feloniously slaying one Horton Graunt, and robbing the body of certain coin of the country.

"That sounds genuine," added the major, coldly, "and I think you had better take the young man along without any further parley. Ground Hog will never allow any interference in the course of justice."

"Ground Hog be hanged!" chipped in Charley. "I'm talking for myself. I suppose there has been some infernal mistake, for the paper sounds genuine enough. But they don't move him out of this to-night, and in the morning I'll go along to see fair play. My pard wouldn't kill a sick kitten, and he didn't kill this Horton Graunt."

"Kerrect you be, no doubt, an' you kin go erlong all yer hev a mind to. We're a-stoppin' at ther Transcontinental, an' I guess he'll bunk with us ter-night ef it does crowd a leetle. Ef ye'r' 'round, say an hour after grub comes up, you'll hit us prezactly, an' lose no time. Ef that don't suit yer why—ther law must hev its way."

Sands did not look convinced, but Morton broke in:

"Yaas, yaas, old chappie. I know all yaw're going to say, but let it go. I'll pwove it all aw deuced mistake, and be back for the concert day after to-morrow night. Handle me with ca'h, Mr. Pete, and I'll be sweet on yaw. I'm weddy now. Cholly, old boy, wait foah me at the dug-out, and tell Isaac that the boad goes on wheth-aw I'm thah or not. Good-night all. The concert will still go on all the same."

He shut down on any more parley, and, in spite of Sands, walked off quite jauntily.

The three men went directly to the Transcontinental, taking Le Roy with them.

As they had hinted, the accommodations were rather scanty, but strong in conscious innocence the young man threw himself down, and in a few moments was sound asleep, leaving the three to smoke their pipes, and converse in a low tone.

"He takes it easy," said Pete, glancing over at the bed. "That's jest ther noble kind av gerloot I'm in love with. Takes them ez they comes, an' don't want ter make no trouble fur nobody. But his pard's a kiote on wheels. I don't figger much on him. I don't jest guess yer wants him ter go 'long in ther mornin'?"

"You bet not. I've heard sich roosters talk afore, an' we don't want any ov him in ourn."

"What's ther matter with startin' right off, then? We kin git half-way thar afore he moves."

"That's our style, prezactly. Ther bantam can't kick fur a cent. Ef he does, we'll cut his comb and roust him out jest too quick."

The suggestion was acted upon at once, at least so far as getting ready, though it was nearly an hour before a heavy hand, for a second time, was clapped on Morton's shoulder, and he was told that it was time to be moving.

"Whah's Cholly?" he exclaimed, trying to start up.

"Now see hyer, young man. Don't yer be goin' ter try ter put on frills. We're startin' fur Bumble's Bar to-night, and you make up yer mind jest too heavenly quick whether you're goin' ter go like a gentleman—ridin' at yer lei-ure—er ef yer go like er durned fool, neck an' crop. We want ter treat yer well but we ain't got no time ter fool. In course we didn't want er racket et ther s'loon, but ef thet young rooster ez war billin' 'round thought we was

wastin' time—it ain't our fault ef he's a bigger fool than he looks. Ef he war my pard I'd be lookin' fur him ter be sottin' on ther porch with a double-barr'l shotgun. Ez he's yourn I s'pose he's in bed an' snorin'. He's a bigger gump than you be, fur you takes things like a gentleman; an' we're goin' ter give yer a comfortable time ef ye keeps it up. That's right. You gittin' ready 'thout a word, an' we're jest a-waitin' on yer."

Morton rubbed his eyes, listened awhile without manifesting much interest or concern, got up slowly, and dressed himself.

"I'm weddy," was his only remark, and the quartette left the Transcontinental without any one but the proprietor being the wiser.

About sunrise Charley Sands came up from the Gulch. He had accumulated a horse and an extra pair of revolvers, and was all ready for the road.

He tied his horse at the doorway and sauntered in, inquiring for the men from Bumble's Bar. When informed that they were probably fifteen or twenty miles on the road he softly whispered some profanity to himself, and then asked why and at what time they left, and by which trail.

The answers were not very definite but he threw himself on his horse and dashed away, without taking the trouble to report at the Lame Eagle. The orchestra might go hang.

Meantime Morton was riding along very composedly, in the care of the men with the warrant. He had his own thoughts, but they did not concern the men with whom he was riding, so that for the most part he was silent. When they addressed him he answered briefly. To his mind it was all clear that Horton Graunt had quietly executed a retreat as soon as he had left him alone at the Bar; and that suspicion had fallen upon him as being the last person seen with the missing man. He was trying to plan how to show his innocence without laying open the motives of Graunt for executing such a masterly retreat. He did not doubt but that it could be done before the case should become desperate, but as yet had not hit upon a way.

Hour after hour passed. Day broke, and then the sun rose. At the first Morton looked around him suspiciously; at the second he was on his guard.

"My good fwiends, it stwikes me that yaw're not on the woad to Bumble's Bar at all. Why this diwersion?"

"Don't ax questions ef yer don't want ter hear lies. Jest mosey 'long till we tell yer ter stop. Ain't we got a warrant?"

"I begin, aw, to suspweat—"

"That you're in the hands of the Hair-pins, ha, ha! Well, my boy, if yer opens up clean ter bed rock I guess you'll find us better men than the gang at ther Bar. Now, dry up and mosey on. Ther boss are waitin' fur you, an' he's a terror when he's rilled."

"But, aw, let me wemonstwate. If I had known! This is quite a different thing. I am vewy busy. Next week, now. I ought to go back, indeed I ought. I haven't even dwan my wages yet, and haven't a cent to offaw him, not a wed cent."

"It's not coin we want out of you. The captain wants a little talk with yer, and you can go 'tend to yer business afterward. Hold yer yawp now!"

The man who had acted marshal spoke more roughly than ever, and raised his hand with a threatening gesture, as though he intended to slap the prisoner in the mouth.

To his surprise and disgust Morton's fist shot straight out like a little lamp of lead, and taking him well up on the face sent him heels over head out of his saddle.

If he had made the effort the dude might have made good his escape—at least there would have been something of a chance provided the animal on which he was mounted was fleet enough of foot. But he made no effort, sitting at ease on his horse and watching the dismounted man with a quaintly quizzical look that was comical enough to see for any one but Solid Pete. His two pards jerked their revolvers out at the blow; but held their hands as they saw no effort on the part of the young man to get away, and watched the two, pretty well broken up with laughter.

"I wouldn't, I weally wouldn't, doan'tchaw know!" drawled the dude. "The captain wants me to talk, and how could I talk, aw, if yaw blew me cold?"

"That's so, Pete. He's talkin' hoss-sense now," interposed one of the others.

"He ain't tryin' ter git away, an' ef yer takes his measure fur a box we'll jest hev ter tell ther big Hair-pin why it war did. An' he wants ter see him mighty bad; so yer kin jedge. Yer shouldn't 'a' tried ter crowd him. Hold hard, thar!"

Solid Pete was fumbling for his pistol as he rose to his feet. Fortunately, he was too much abroad to at once grasp the weapon that had slipped a little from its usual place.

The words of his partners brought him to his senses. His hand dropped from his belt, and he remounted the horse, which had scarcely moved a step after its rider was struck.

"Served me right, party; I hedn't orter bin

puttin' on frills. But you're ther deceivin'est coon thet ever struck my trail. Shake, an' try a fresh deal."

"Shake goes," said Morton, serenely. "I only, aw, bit out foah pwactice. Lead on to the mighty satwap, and I'll argwy my case at headquawtaws."

Although little was said, all three of the men seemed to have a great deal more esteem for their prisoner, and they journeyed on together quite comfortably for an hour or more, the route leading through a region gradually increasing in wildness.

Then there was a sudden halt; Solid Pete shoved the barrel of a cocked revolver into Morton's ear, while the others wheeled, and taking their bridle-reins between their teeth, held their hands, the fingers of each outstretched, high above their heads.

CHAPTER XXII.

JEAN LAFITTE HEARS A PROPOSAL.

JEAN LAFITTE began to think that fate had a special spite against him. He not only owed his first violinist a debt of gratitude, but he looked at him as being, in a pecuniary sense, a good investment. With him and the leader gone, his orchestra was "all broke up."

If he had not been so busy hurrying Selka away, he would have been to the front when Solid Pete and his party halted in the bar-room. But he had come upon the scene just when Morton was led off, and was shocked to find the girl there, and more so still to see how deeply she had been affected.

When he returned to the saloon the excitement about the arrest was almost over, and after having heard the particulars he decided that he could do nothing until morning, if even then.

But in the morning he heard that the Marshal of Bumble's Bar had departed with his prisoner some time during the night, and that Charley Sands had followed about sunrise.

He gave a sigh, and, too much troubled to ponder over the question of some new attraction, went to visit Elsie and see whether there was any change for the better.

He found the condition of both the ladies improved, though Selka was very silent. He went back to the Lame Eagle a trifle more hopeful.

In the course of the morning he had a caller—none other than Major Martle.

The major was apt to be brusque in business, and he did not waste breath. After a few words of greeting he spoke his mind squarely.

"Mr. Lafitte, I am not a very old man, and I look and feel younger than my years. As a Frenchman you will understand my motive in coming to you when I say that I love Selka and am anxious to make her my wife. Will you use your influence in my favor?"

"What is ziz zat you say? Zat you were acquainted even I was not aware. She is but ze child. But I recognize ze honaire."

"A very troublesome child you will be apt to find her. Three times within a week she has been in danger. One of those times I had the pleasure of being of use. But some day there will be no one to come to her aid and she will be lost. Consider whether it would not be well to have the responsibility off of your hands. The girl charms me and I would guard her carefully until the exuberance of her youthful spirits had somewhat worn off. You know who I am and my position. She will be doing well in a worldly point of view, and I think she will some day care for me."

Jean made a bow as profound as though it had been learned in Paris.

"Eef it rest wiz me I should not ze moment hesitate, but ze girl an' her muizzer, zay must be consult. I s'all tell zem zat your proposal I favor; but beyond zat it is yourself zat must the way make."

"Thanks. You have become so thoroughly Americanized that I cannot ask for more. I think the young lady understands already, and I shall press my suit more vigorously. I might have been willing to wait a while longer, in silence, had it not been for her late dangers, and, the fact that I feared she might become interested in that adventurer who lately arrived. That he has an eye on her I am well aware; and I was afraid that unless you interfered she might become interested in him. On my account and hers, then, I was glad when the danger was removed. She can hardly think again of a man guilty of murder."

"Zat s'all depend. Ze ladies are strange. Perhaps not, but I s'all run no reesk. I wish not to interfere wiz your love-making, but unless ze girl decides in your favor and you take ze reesk, so soon az ze muizza is able to travel so soon zey both go to ze more civilized country where ze dangaire is not so great."

"Thanks for your frankness. Meantime I have your permission to plead my suit?"

"Certainement."

"And in case you decide to send your niece and her daughter away, let me know. I contemplate a brief trip to look after my interests elsewhere, and I might serve as their escort over the dangerous part of the journey—if you cannot find it convenient to go yourself."

"Wiz pleasure. Ze name of ze major is ze

guarantee zat zey will be ze well taken care of. Eef I go myself I will be glad of ze company, and eef not ze more so."

The major had stated his case and received about as much encouragement as he expected, if not as much as he desired. After a little more conversation he took his departure, leaving Jean to puzzle his brains over the proposal.

It really seemed to him very strange that the major should have conceived so violent a liking for a girl whom he had seen but a few times. And as for a marriage of convenience Martle certainly could do much better. The Lame Eagle was a paying saloon but it was all of his fortune, and even should anything happen to Jean its value might be depreciated, while its title would probably pass, not to Selka but to Elsie.

"Zere must be some reason," he thought.

"All zis is not going on for nothing. Zere is too much ov ze rescue, and I s'all ask Elsie vat it means. Perhaps the major knows something he have not tell me."

The major knew a good deal; and if Jean had suspected the truth he would have been more surprised than even at the occurrences of the last few days.

But the major held his peace and walked off thoughtfully to his office.

Uncle John was there but put on his coat presently to go for his dinner. When the major was alone Bart Harrington sauntered in.

"Sold ag'in," was his greeting.

"That Irisher seems ter hev as many lives as a cat. He's skipped his ranch an' hesn't left ary sign ter trail him by. We found whar he hid when ther dam bu'sted—a sorter cave, up among ther rocks—but he wa'n't thar."

"You are probably aware that he's holding a noose over your neck, and that if you don't drop him he'll be apt to drop it? If money and safety won't bring you up to your work you're good for nothing but the bone-yard. And you made no effort to find out where she was. Where do you think you'll go to if you keep on blundering like this?"

"Inter ther bone-yard, av course; an' so we orter. But hold on, major. We knowed all that, an' we jest took ther trail an' after him, hot-footed. When we got out ter his claim, we thought we had him, sure."

"We didn't, a durned bit. He had us. Ther longer I live ther better I know when it ain't my day on. And it wa'n't this mornin'."

"You found him, did you?"

"Notter blamed bit. He found us, an' when he hailed us ter throw up our hands, thar war a double-barr'l shot-gun helpin' him."

"Don't yez move, course yez!" he sung out.

"Thar's five buckshot in each barr'l, an' both hammers draw'd."

"Thar he waz, comfortable like as two peas, suttin' on er rock, an' lookin' fur all ther world ez though he meant shoot from the word go."

"You tell the boss," he yelled, "that it ain't worth while follerin' me round. Somebody'll git too sick. I'm goin' outer town now, till me pards git back, an' then, if he shows up, they're'll be a holy little cirkis right round this burg."

"I got sick right thar, an' didn't give him any back talk. When he sez, 'Take the trail ter Ground Hog,' we jest took it, and didn't loiter round ther way. Eef I ain't mistook, he's mighty bad medicin'—that same Ike Muldoon."

"And you call yourself a boss cut-throat!" said the major, with bitter scorn. "You and your pards deserve to climb a tree. It's only another failure; and this time there should have been no failure. It is worse to have frightened him away than to have left him alone altogether. Then I would have known where to find him. Pah! It makes me sick!"

"An' it makes me tired; but Billy got his Winchester an' took a fresh start. Eef he don't bring in his scalp, it'll be acause you told me ter be hyar about this time."

"Then there's a chance yet, and I'll wait till I see how it ends before I say anything more about the failure. How many men have you that you can count on as good to tie to? Solid fighters, that won't squirm at anything from cutting a throat to robbing a church?"

"Half a dozen besides my pards, an' I kin pick up more ef needed."

"No, no! That will be enough. Keep them in hand well; I may need them at any time. But don't give them a hint of what the service is till the last moment. I may not need them all. I may want them all to-night, though the probability is not before to-morrow night. We must get in our work before the moon rises. For that reason I would prefer to wait; but perhaps I cannot. Don't come here again. I have given out that I have bought your claim, and sent some men over to work on it; but there might be a suspicion that there was some other reason for it if you are seen about the office too often."

"Jest ez yer wants it. When you whistle I'll come, ez long as I find ther grub-pan full when I get thar."

"That's your platform. All right! But remember that some sportsmen have a way of shooting their pointers when they don't come to heel. You can range now—here's a hundred on account—but don't get too far, so that you can't

hear the whistle." The major tossed the century on the table with an air that showed he considered the interview ended. He now here exhibited his nerve more than on his way of dealing with Bart Harrington. It was true that he held a noose over Bart's neck, and that he was paying him well while putting himself in his power; but for all that Harrington was considered to be pretty much like tinder, and other men had set him off with what were but sparks by the side of Major Martle's flames.

The advantage that the major held was that, with his position, if both drew and he was the quicker, there would be no investigating committee sitting on the remains. How much effect that had on either side was hard to say.

"By the way," remarked Bart, before taking his departure:

"It was agreed betwixt Billy an' me that ef he got Ike's scalp he war ter hev ther balance of my share what's comin' on gittin' ther gel outen the gulch, t'other night. An' ef he got Billy's I war ter take the stakes an' finish ther job on our own 'count. Yer said suthin' 'bout a thousand; but I guess yer ain't goin' that high?"

"I'll consider the question; but it strikes me you've been pretty well paid already, considering the work that you didn't do. I wouldn't mind carrying the girl off myself for a hundred. We'll consider further when Billy comes in."

Alone once more the major frowned.

"The hounds are getting entirely too fresh. If anything *should* happen to me Bart wouldn't be half so much afraid of having to go back to Ongles, and stretch a rope. If I didn't need them yet, I should say it was time for them to retire. When Ike is settled, and this job on a fair way to completion they *must*, if they should *happen* to cut up rusty, take me prisoner, and all that, and if I should *happen* to shoot all three in getting away, I think I would receive due credit from the community."

"And there seems to be little time to waste. There's something strange about that warrant for the dude. I could have sworn that Horton Graunt was dead enough to last till after the resurrection; how can that strolling fiddler have killed him again? Yet, if he did, there's been the narrowest miss of the season, and the devil has been helping his own. Curses on it. What was bringing Graunt here? Could he have found out—and how? Any way at all it shows that there were some inquiries about to be made that might have upset everything. I'll run no risks by waiting!"

Unconsciously he uttered the last sentence aloud; and was more than startled at the prompt answer he heard at his shoulder:

"That's so, party—jest what I thort—an' so I bring it right in fur you ter look at. Eef it don't do your soul good an' put scads in my pocket by the barrel full, I'm not a man ov peace, an' me name ain't Billy Rakestraw. How's this fur high?"

"What do you mean?" cried the major, as he wheeled sharply, a revolver in his hand.

He realized that for once he had been caught napping; and was in no good humor over the fact.

"It's ther scalp of Ike Muldoon," answered Billy, waving his hand with a flourish.

In his fist he grasped a handful of red hair, that seemed to have been lately torn from the skull; and as he struck it on the table a single drop of blood spattered across the board and struck the major in the center of the cheek, leaving a little, round, crimson stain.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TAKING OF THE SCALP.

BART HARRINGTON had held about as close to the truth as he well knew how, in the history of the morning exercises, the other facts in the Muldoon case amounting to about this.

After seeing Morton swept away the major had not a doubt of not only his death and the girl's, but of that of the other supposed occupants of the dug-out.

While two of the pards conveyed Selka to her uncle the third set out in search of Martle, to tell him the news.

It took some little time to find him in the general excitement, but they had not been mistaken in their conjectures about how he would receive the intelligence.

Of Morton nothing definite could be told, save that he had been left lying in the gulch, senseless, and to all appearance dead.

Search and careful inquiry only disclosed the fact that he was there no longer, no one seeming to know how he got away. The inquiries, however, started a rumor that he had been killed, and the rumor got around to the major again. As he didn't care to appear prominently he was content with this and went to his rooms. It was late the next morning before he had positive proof that not only was Morton alive, but that Ike and Sands were both uninjured.

After Martle's failure to corral Muldoon at the time of the abduction—as he had intended to from the moment the plan was conceived—it seemed more than ever a necessity to take in the Irishman. In fact it was a matter of life

and death if Ike could get his story believed; for that it would be told, sooner or later, there could hardly be a doubt.

As Muldoon seldom visited the town after night, and would not be likely to bother his claim much for the present, an attack on him, near his dug-out, seemed to be the only alternative. With Morton and Sands out of the way he would be alone, and it was worth while to make an effort.

Bart and his pards already knew so much that all that was left was to use them to the very limit, and then kill them off. They undertook the job without hesitation and started off at an early hour to prospect.

As a result they saw Sands depart, and a little later Ike with a double barreled shot-gun. To Martie, Bart had not been very definite in this part of the story; though they ransacked the remodeled building and found out what, as they believed, led to some such secret retreat as he mentioned.

Then they set out for Ike's claim, and were cornered in the unexpected way described.

When Billy Rakestraw started on the trail by himself he intended to have a sure thing of it, or else not chip in at all. If Muldoon was at his claim it would not be hard to find him; and as nearly all the other mining ventures in that neighborhood had been abandoned it ought not be difficult to get a long range shot without being seen.

And Billy was a master hand with a rifle.

With the patience of an Indian he made a long detour, to approach from a direction whence he would not be expected, finally crawling nearly half a mile to make sure that he would not be seen.

"That'll do," he muttered to himself as he settled down to watch.

"There's no spyin' whelp kin see me from hyar; an' when we git in ther fine work a feller's got a chance ter git away 'thout being seen. Isaac, ef ye'r in that hole ye'r a dead man."

"An', be dad, it's not in ther howl I am at all, at all; an' if it ain't Billy Rakestraw thet's goin' up ther flume may Oi niver dance at me wake. Ef yer moves Oi drill yer, an' ef yer sets still Oi'll hang yer, so yer kin hev yer ch'ice. But hands up onnyway!"

By a strange fatality, or in accordance with the shrewd reasoning of the Irishman, Billy had managed to crawl right past, and locate himself about a dozen feet from where the former was lying in ambush, and once more Isaac was the head of the deck.

Billy found his Winchester a mistake just then. He had it in his hands, and didn't know what to do with it.

It wouldn't do to try a snap-shot with it against a double-barreled shot-gun, loaded with buck-shot, cocked and aimed; while to drop it and grab for a revolver meant mortal sickness.

"Oi'm countin' foive, an' av yer hands ain't up Oi'll foire—an' an' illegant skimmer you'll be afther makin', er a ventillather. It's full enough ov howles yez will be afther bein'. Wan! Two! Three!"

Down came Billy's gun with a crash, and up went his hands. He had held up his hands once before that day under similar circumstances, and was getting used to the operation.

Very cautiously Isaac drew his revolver with one hand, while with the other he laid down his gun on the ground.

Then he advanced stealthily, and before Billy knew what was coming his belt dropped and he was disarmed.

"Now loie down wid yer face to ther ground an' yer hands crossed furnist yer back. It's no chances Ike Muldoon is givin' away."

It was a hard pill to swallow, but Ike's voice was very firm, and down he went.

Then Ike knelt on Billy, so that he could not possibly get away, and leisurely knotted his wrists together.

"Now, av yez wants ter save me throuble yez kin roise up an' waltz over onder yonder tree. Av yez don't Oi'll be afther carryin' yez, so yer hez yer ch'ice."

Again Billy obeyed, though he opened up a conversation on the immorality of hitting a fellow when he was down.

"But Oi don't m'ane yez ter bedown a minnit longer thin Oi kin help. Oi'm fixin' ther rope now, an' Oi'll have yez up in a howly minnit. Thin Oi'll hit yer corrupse fur good luck ez often ez yez want. It's a babed mon ez will ownly hit anither whin be'z down."

Up to this time Rakestraw had not felt much concern, but now he began to see that the aggravation of this second attack had driven all the geniality out of Ike's face. He never laughed once, and did not look at all like swearing the prisoner in and letting him go.

He had come very near to doing that once too often.

"See hyar now, Irish, what yer goin' ter do? This hyar's a dirty mean job you've set up on me, an' I'd like ter git an idear how yer goin' ter run it."

"A lame doock wid half an oye c'u'd say that. It's ter hang yez I m'ane. Ther rope's on yer thrapple, an' yez have half a minnit ter say yer prayers. Thin up yez go. That pard ov yours was afther thryin' it on me, an' av Oi can't git

him Oi'll take wan av ther gang an' lit him say how it is hisself."

"But that's bloody murder. Yer wouldn't have the cheek, an' me a-throwin' up me hands at ther first shout."

"Sure, an' av yez hadn't yez would have bin did alriddy. Av yez are done wid yer prayers, Oi'll begin ter poull."

"Done!" roared Rakestraw. "I ain't got ter ther prayin' yit. I'm talkin' ter you. And ef yer knows what's solid sense, you'll drop that rope and let me go. When Bart and Bob hears this they'll be after you hot. Why, they'll jest skin yer alive, an' then fry yer feet brown over a slow fire."

"Lit 'em froy. They're afther me allriddy, an' I can't make it worse. Ther's only wan way yez kin git out av ther rope, an' that yez won't do; so up yez go, an' it's ther last toime av sp'akin'."

And with a strength that Rakestraw would not have expected, Ike began to pull upon the rope.

Billy's neck elongated; his heels rose from the ground until just the toes touched. By an effort he could sustain himself for a little while, but when the strength of the muscles in his feet was exhausted, his weight was bound to come on the rope.

Under such circumstances he was not likely to waste his powers in useless struggles. His face gradually lost the look of rage, and took on one of fear. When Ike made the rope fast and began leisurely to fill his duleen, the victory over his nerve was complete. So Muldoon thought, and he wasted no time when he saw it.

Loosening the end of the rope, he allowed Rakestraw's heels to stand once more solidly on the ground.

"That's ther wan that's fur nothing. Number two 'll be fur show. Three 'll be ter make riddy; an' four ter go. After that you'll be quoyght did; barrin' ther fact that yer moight make me an offer."

"What kind ov an offer do yer want? Ef it's anything comfortable like," muttered Billy, "give us a show. I ain't goin' ter hang hyar like a sheep-killin' cur ef I kin be a man ov peace."

"D'yez moinde now, Oi've a fa'llin' ter save yer bacon av Oi did on'y thrust yez; but that's phat I wor afeard av doin'. How kin I know that yez won't go back on me?"

"I'll swar—bring me ther Bible. Bring me a dozen ov 'em, an' I'll jest make yer blood run cold ther way I'll swear."

"That's phat's ther matter. Ye'r too blamed riddy wid yer swearin'. Oi'll put it to yer this way: Ther major's nothin' but a bloody road-agent, an' he's bound ter go up moighty soon, an' ef he don't turn yer toes up afoure ye'r knowin' too much, it's wid him you'll be makin' ther joorney whin he goes over ther range. Ef yer sarve me this toime, Oi'll sp'ake a good worrud fur yez, an' yez kin git out av ther draft. An' av yez don't promise me fair an' squar', wid yer hand in moine, be the cross an' squar' an' ther great foive aces, ter do as Oi say, Oi'm swingin' yez up, an' be done wid it. An' av yez breaks yer oath, Oi'll folly yez up an' shoot yez down av it's to ther althar yez l'ades me."

So much of deadly earnestness did Muldoon put in his tone that Billy Rakestraw fairly shivered as he answered:

"Let me hands loose an' I'll swear anyway yer wants it. I've got ther major about milked dry anyway; an' I'm tired ov pards ez rakes in ther sheer ov ther soap, an' leaves me ter do ther nasty part ov ther work. Bart's got ter crook in his elbow too much, an' Bob Ridley's onre-liable."

Though Ike was not at all certain that his man was going to keep faith, he released him, and then together the plot was hatched up, the execution of which has already been described. Billy carried it out true to the life, and for once Major Martie was thoroughly deceived. He felt certain that Muldoon was dead, and that was all that Isaac bargained for.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BIG HAIR-PIN MEANS BUSINESS.

MORTON showed no concern at the sudden and eccentric movements of the outlaws. Indeed, so far as any one had ever seen, he never did show any concern about anything. He understood that if their object was to kill him, he would hardly have been brought to this lonely place, and if they did not, the motions were probably a signal of some kind, or else an answer to a challenge that he had not observed.

He was not mistaken, since, after having made their motions, the two turned to him, Solid Pete still holding the revolver at his head.

"Now, pard, yer needn't feel afeard—not till yer hez hed yer talk with ther boss, anyhow. But hold yer head still while we tie a rag round yer eyes. Ef we took yer in without it you might know about ez much ez we did, an' find it handy ef yer hed a chance ter skip."

"All wight. Yaw have things in yaur own hands; wun the machine accawding. Foah woad-agents it stwikes me yaw're a jolly good fellow, and if I have the chaunce I won't soon fawget yaw."

"Thankee, boss, though them ez goes over this hyar route don't generally hev much time left fur recomembran's, furgittin, er anything else. I hope you'll hev better luck then ther balance."

"Thawnks again. That will do. I cawn't see a thing. If yaw see me dwopping ovahboa'd, sing out, so I cahn say a pwayer. Now dwive on, and no fooling."

The men looked at him a little suspiciously, for his words, though they might be spoken at random, seemed to argue an acquaintance with the place.

"We'll take keer on yer, boss, ef yer jest lets yerself go. But don't yer git ter thinkin' yer knows ther road better than them ez travels it, 'cos then yer will slop over. Hyar yer goes."

Morton made no great miss, for in a few moments he could tell by the sounds of the horses' feet that they were passing over a bridge of some kind, and he could feel a swaying motion.

There had been no bridge visible, nor any sign of one when they halted; but there was just the glimpse of a chasm a little way ahead, with rising rock beyond it; and over this they were passing, by a rude suspension bridge of rope. After that was crossed Morton could form no conjecture of the path, except that it was rocky, and led upward.

After following this for some time a halt was made and Morton was told to dismount. Then the man who had last spoken to him led him away, still blindfolded.

"Keep yer ears skinned an' yer wits about yer, fer Captain Hair-Pin don't ax things twice over. He ain't no use fer men ez can't talk 'thout too much stirrin', an' I don't want no job ov plantin' stiff's ter-night yit. He's a shouter on ther shoot, an' don't you furgit it."

With the warning the man lapsed into silence, and this next voice that Le Roy heard was a harsh, rasping one, as though its owner might be speaking in a feigned tone.

"You're sure yer got ther right man, are yer? He looks like a no account gerloot, an' ef he don't talk right from ther rattles yer needn't wait fur orders. Slim Bob bez come in frum ther scout an' I reckon from what he sez he's hit ther trail, so you kin put this 'un ter bed in ther berryin' ground. You sabbe?"

"All right, Kingpin. Ef he don't talk ter suit yer, wink yer left eye. I'll pull, fer I hez him kivered now."

"Hyar, you! Short an' sweet, now. Whar is Horton Graunt?"

"Bless my soul, young man, I'm not, aw, his keepah."

"It makes no difference what yer thinks; it's what yer knows that we're after."

"But, my good fellow, I don't know anything about him."

That's ther boss thet won't trot. We know all about ther story he told you, and the arrangement you made. He war ter hide away, an' you war ter go ter Ground Hog an' find out what he wanted ter know. Thair's jest a cool, clean twenty thousand dollars in his hide an' we wants ter find it. We're lettin' yer down easy, so fur; jest take keer we don't change front, an' drop yer mighty hard."

"But cawn't yaw see; and won't yaw do it? Fwom yawr weport I shuld judge, aw, that he got away fwom Bumble's Bar without being seen; but I don't know whah he went. That's pawsitively and dweadfully twue. And I, aw, don't know more if I die for it."

The outlaw looked at Morton keenly; and it seemed as though he had not been angered beyond endurance by the straightforward manner of the young man.

"Mebbe we did git the cart afore the hoss that time; but what we heard came very straight, and we reckoned very sure you'd got ther word by this time, ef yer didn't hev it when yer skipped ther camp. Hyar! Take that rag offen his eyes an' let's see what he looks like when he's talkin'."

With some little trouble the cloth was removed, and Morton had an opportunity to look around him.

The man who was questioning him was rough and tough looking, over six feet high, with the build of a Hercules. His hair and beard were long, reaching away down below his shoulders, and almost concealing his features, though in the midst of the hirsute mass a pair of cool black eyes glowed and gleamed with an angry light. He was dressed in black velvet coat, vest, and pantaloons, while around his waist was a broad web belt that held four revolvers and a knife, together with a large supply of cartridges.

He looked to be a very good specimen of an outlaw; and if all reports were true the man did not belie his looks.

The eyes of the two met squarely, and for a moment the road-agent stared unblinkingly at his prisoner.

In the duel of eyes one man was almost as good as the other. If there was any difference it was not in favor of Le Roy H. Morton.

"Now, my lad, say that over," said the captain, "an' say it all-fired slow, ef thar's ary trouble in yer mind about gettin' enter ther bed rock ov truth. Whar'll we find Horton Graunt? I don't mind tellin' yer we've bin lay-

in' fur him from 'way back. Ther blasted fool hez twenty thousand in collaterals with him, an' we bin trackin' him fur nigh onter three weeks, 'thout gittin' a clean grip onter him. Ef old Pete, blast him, hed gone a leetle slower we'd 'a' had him up ter ther rack an' all outen his mis'ry. We'll hev him sum day, so it don't make much difference ter us, 'cept fur savin' time an' worry; but it makes heap big ter you, an' don't yer disremember."

The outlaw leaned over and stared at Morton, while his eyes more than ever resembled twin coals of fire.

And once more, in his drawling, deliberate way, Morton answered in as few words as would cover the ground.

"Ther cuss looks ez though he was tellin' ther truth," said the other, slowly. "Ef he are, it's mighty onlucky fur him. Take him to ther dungeon, an' keep him thar. Ef he sez, in ther mornin', thet he don't know no more, hang him, an' bring me his thumbs. Ef he says he'll squeal, fetch him byar. Off with him!"

As the interview had closed in a less sanguinary way than the opening had promised, Morton did not think it best to add another word, so that he simply nodded, and followed the man who stepped forward to lead him away.

On the road to his prison cell he was halted long enough to allow him to partake of a simple but very welcome meal, and then was hustled off in a great hurry.

"The dungeon" was no better than its name, if not worse. It was entered by a low, narrow passage, and proved to be a small cell in the solid rock, irregular in its shape as far as could be felt, and into which a direct ray of sunlight never came.

"Weally!" said Morton, seating himself on the rocky floor with a grunt, "if this was to be my abiding-place foah the remainder ov my life, I believe I'd soonah hang. Wondah what Isaac and our friend Mr. Sands would think of this? And how Cholly howled when he fround I was missing. It's wediculous to think ov it."

And Mr. Morton laughed as he made a picture in his mind's eye of Charley Sands on the high horse over the moonlight flitting.

"Young feller in thar!" broke in a voice. I want ter say ez I hev orders ter shoot ther first livin' thing ez I see comin' outen this hole; an' I'm a-goin' ter do it. Thar'll be some laffin' on t'other side ov ther mouth, an' I'd 'dvice yer ter button yer lip an' go slow, er I'll hev ter come in an' give yer a sottlin' down ez it are. Yer hear me!"

"Slow goes, an' thanks foah the warning," retorted Le Roy. "I've found the bed, and the west is of no consequence. Call me when suppah is weady. Now, dwy up."

Having tossed out as good as he got, the young man stretched himself out at full length, and without much trouble, was soon asleep.

In due time he was called to supper and as duly remanded. Then the chief unexpectedly paid him a visit.

"See hyar, youngster, there's one question I furgot ter mention. This side pard ov yours—whar did he kerry his chips? It mout make a diff'rens, don't yer see, when we overhauls him, ef we know whether ter kill him at ther jump, er save him up fur future usefulness."

"Weally, Mistah Outlaw, I don't know. It's a pwetty qwestion to ask me."

"No doubt, no doubt; but we'll show yer something a heap purtier in ther mornin'. You an' he orter hang tergether; an' blame me ef I don't b'leve yer will. He hed twenty thousand on him when he struck ther Territory; an' now we can't find note ner coin. But it's got ter come, er thar'll be Graunt on toast, all 'round ther board. You tell him so, an' mebbe he'll learn sense."

Then, in a louder tone, to some one without:

"Bring in yer pris'ner. Thar's room byar fur a d'zen."

There was a gleam of light at the doorway and then a man entered, bearing a torch, followed by two others who led between them—Horton Graunt.

CHAPTER XXV.

A DOUBLE ABDUCTION.

THE little arrangement made between Billy Rakestraw and Ike Muldoon was completed so soon as the major was befooled. There was no further reason why the former should not go into business with his old pards, if there was an opening to make money, and he did not hesitate when Bart called the roll. He answered to his name and the three pards were once more in business together, though Billy knew that he was keeping a dangerous secret.

The major, also, knew that he was playing with fire; but now that Muldoon was disposed of he had his intentions. He determined to push the game vigorously and at once, though he would have liked to have heard a report from Jean Lafitte. It was possible that his proposal might be received in such a way that further underhanded work would be unnecessary.

Jean lost very little time. He wanted to tell the major's proposition to some one, and went to see his sister that very afternoon. He found her so very much, so very much better in every

way, that he did not hesitate to tell her of his interview with Martie, and ask her advice in regard to sounding Selka on the subject.

But Elsie showed more excitement than the case seemed to warrant.

"Wait, wait!" she exclaimed. "Dare not to speak to her now. This man have I not seen, and I must speak with him. But Selka knows not what is the good for her, even should we show her, for she has heard much and her brain is wild. Go not near her lest she talk too much and do herself harm. To-morrow I may something myself say to her."

Jean was somewhat puzzled.

It had been Elsie for whom he was concerned; and though it was natural that there should be some reaction after the adventures of the past few days, he had been thinking that now the danger was over, all that Selka had to do was to nurse her mother. He might have thought that Elsie, like other mad people he had heard of, fancied every one was demented save herself.

But try as he would, Jean could not believe that Elsie's mind was, at present, unstrung. There were some traces of suppressed excitement, but for all that she had not seemed saner, if so sane, for years.

He did not know that her partial confession made to Selka had eased her mind, and she no longer looked forward with so much horror to the revelation of the whole truth.

She would have suggested that confidences were in order had the opportunity been offered her; but just now, the first stunning force of the shock being over, Selka was quietly mourning for her dead, and sharing her grief with no one.

Elsie had her suspicions—even as Jean had his. She feared to mention them lest it might develop more than she cared to tell him at present. The arrest of Le Roy Morton for the murder of one Horton Graunt at once surprised and frightened her.

Since she had told her story to Selka she had thought it over calmly, and seen Morton again; and it seemed to her that a chance resemblance had befooled her. Certainly the man who led the attack that night could never so have renewed his youth. Her eyes had been blinded, her mind had been wandering. There was a terrible mistake somewhere. And now—since she did not know that it was with a murder of a few days before and a few miles away that he was charged, it seemed as though her senses had been keenest when she was doubting them the most. And then there was Major Martie. She had much to think of.

Jean had moved the two because he fancied the noise and confusion of the saloon would be injurious. The question of safety within the limits of the camp had never entered his mind.

The family living in the house consisted of but two persons—a man and his wife. Jean knew them well. They were indebted to him for temporary assistance at a time they needed it, and he had no doubts of their gratitude. The woman would be of use, too, in case a nurse was needed. Considering his nieces safe there, he slept serenely in his own house, though ready to join his "family" a moment's notice.

It was a little before midnight when Elsie was awakened by a hand being clapped over her mouth. As there was a sticking-plaster of some kind under the hand, she was unable to cry out, and a gripe that gathered in her wrists rendered her unable to struggle.

"Not a whisper, old lady! We don't want ter wake ther gal. Ef she does come to, we'll kill yer, drop ther corpus, an' slide out. Ef yer comes willin' like I reckon most likely yer won't be hurt. That's our platform, an' don't yer furgit it."

It was a coarse, hoarse whisper that sent these words into her ear; and the point of a knife, held at her breast, made her understand the full extent of their earnestness. Without another struggle she lay passive.

"Yer' off yer base a leetle anyhow, an' they'll think yer went fur a midnight stroll, an' furgot ter come back. They kin keep on a-thinkin' so. Mebbe by ther time they quits ther gal'll hev furgot that you're her mother."

The house was not one of two stories—such buildings are rare in a small mining-town—but there was a reasonably comfortable attic, that was divided through the center by a board partition. One of the two rooms thus formed was occupied by Selka, the other by Elsie. When the latter retired the door was open; but it was shut now, and a masked man was just driving a gimlet into the frame to hold it firmly to its place should Selka awake.

After the explanation there was no delay. Elsie had flung herself down, dressed as she was, to think. It prevented trouble now. The intruders led her to the window, and having drawn tightly and knotted a bandage they had placed over the plaster upon her mouth, let her down to a third man who stood in waiting below.

Then the ruffians, having drawn the gimlet from the door-frame, descended.

Carefully they carried back to its former resting-place the little ladder by which their ascent had been made, and then, having the un-

resisting and helpless woman between them, made off.

Once fairly beyond the limits of the camp—and they reached them without molestation—Elsie was placed on her feet.

"Yer won't hev fur ter walk," growled the man who had been her original captor.

"Thar's a pard ov ourn waitin' down ther road, an' when we strike him we'll git up an' git a-hossback. This hyar walkin' 'll do fur a pinch; but it's hossback thet's ther best holt, every time."

A little further and the pard was joined. He was seated on the back of a horse, and held by the bridles four others.

"Yer made ther raffle?" he asked, as they came up.

"Began ter think thet suthin' hed gone wrong, an' I war talkin' out in meetin', you bet. Ef yer hedn't hove in sight jest when yer did I'd 'a' bin goin' back ter report yer all killed, wounded an' missin'. H'iste her up, an' we'll cut dirt ter git outen hyar. It's no fool ov a job thet we hev, an' one I ain't a-yearnin' fur. An' I c'u'd 'a' swore I heard v'ices up yonder. On-pleasant it would be ter hev ther Gulch chippin' in right behind us. Don't waste no time but kill her ef ther's a show fur ther rest ov Ground Hog ter git onter ther game. Ther ball's 'ready opened. We kin bear ther brass band fur nothin' an' hev a free ticket fur ther show, ef we don't look sharp an' spy. Ef ye'r' all ready, foller me."

At a signal the little party went off at a gallop, Elsie riding in their midst. Had she fallen or flung herself down she would have stood a good chance of losing her life under the tramping feet.

She did neither, for her wits were all about her, and she could ride like a witch.

One thought was uppermost in her mind.

"Why, I know not, but these men will take me straight to the one who killed Horton Graunt."

It was half an hour after Elsie had disappeared that, back in Ground Hog, almost the same scene was re-enacted. With just as much cold precision three men, by the same means, entered Selka's bedroom, and found her lying as Elsie had lain—sound asleep. She was awakened as rudely.

The difference seemed to be that this party did not appear quite so much at its ease. They were in haste, though they were noiseless; and made few explanations. But then their game was more difficult.

The caution was given in a still lower tone than that to Elsie, and was not nearly so explicit.

"You give er whimper an' we'll kill yer, too quick, blast ye! Thar's a heap pile ov coin in yer clothes, and ef we can't finger it we won't be leavin' any chances fur ary one else ter foler an' scoop it. You ain't goin' ter git hurt onless we hev ter drop yer; an' then we'll drop yer hard. You sabbe? Ef yer does, git ready. Ef yer don't, we'll take yer 'long 'thout gittin' ready; an' it's a blame long ride."

By the feeble lamplight Selka could see the ruffians bending over her, with their weapons at her head. They were masked and disguised, so that she could not frame a guess who they might be, but she had not a doubt that they meant what they said.

An overmastering fear took possession of her that Elsie might be awakened by the noise and attempt to come to her assistance. Had she known of what had occurred so short a time before she would have had more grief and less fear.

The preparations she was allowed to make were few and simple, though the moments they took seemed long enough. Then, without any attempt to conceal the way of their departure, they led her away through the window opposite to the one through which Elsie had vanished.

"Yer see, we wants ter treat yer ther best we know how, 'cause ther's money in yer. We don't want no sick woman on our hands. But we ain't takin' no risk, an' we ain't lettin' go. Ef ary gerlout chips we kill him; an' ef he's too hefty we kill you. That's a squar' deal 'thout a flyer. Sabbe?"

She understood only too well, though at another time she might not have accepted the situation so tamely. So far there were only three men visible, but as they hurried along, she thought she saw other figures of men lurking in the distance.

Then there was some excitement. One man dropped quietly by the side of the trail, while the others hurried her along for a few rods.

Behind them rose a sharp, quick hail.

"Halt there, you villains! Hands up, or there will be dead meat!"

A man came dashing toward them.

It was so dark that his figure could hardly be recognized at the distance, but the voice seemed like that of Major Martie, and he held a revolver in each hand.

Unfortunately, it was plain to Selka that he must come to close quarters before he could shoot without risk of hitting her; while, if it was not for the fear of alarming the town, the abductors could slay him as he came.

To his challenge no spoken answer was given,

but the girl felt the keen point of a knife enter her dress from behind and just puncture the skin. It was a hint to keep silent.

Then the man who had dropped out by the side of the trail sprung up behind the other as he passed, and shot out a fist with a terrific blow that sent him headlong.

"Go back an' git him," hissed the ruffian at Selka's back.

"We ain't leavin' no sich timber lyin' round loose, fur some gerloot ter stumble over. Mebbe thar's coin in him. Ef not we kin put him in a hole. It's a mighty bad time fer an outsider ter want ter shake hands with this gang. It looks blamed much like Major Martle."

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN AWFUL INTERRUPTION.

If appearances went for anything the man was treated without mercy. With rage and disgust Selka saw her captors tie him so securely that motion of his own accord would be almost impossible. There was no time for investigating just then; the great thing was to get away as soon as possible. He was bundled along in a rough and ready way and finally bundled on a horse in front of one of the ruffians, while Selka was placed before another. The time had come when reckless haste was to be used, and there was a headlong flight for half an hour or more before any pause was made.

Some time before that there were sounds of serious life about the man, who began to kick and squirm. When the horses stopped he rolled off.

Something in his movements caused the leader of the masks, who was none other than Bart Harrington, to look more closely, and then utter an exclamation of surprise and disgust. He tore away the handkerchief from the man's mouth and brought him to a sitting posture with a mighty jerk.

"Say, blast yer! what yer doin' hyar, an' who be yer? You ain't Major Martle, an' that's a fact."

"Certainly not, sir—certainly not! But it makes no difference. I am his private secretary, so you see it's quite all the same—quite all the same."

Bart uttered a hoarse laugh that came dangerously near to his ordinary tone, and then drawled out:

"Wal, I *will* be hanged!"

"Quite likely, sir—quite likely. Don't let me interfere with your arrangements. Any place at all—any place at all. Perhaps you still do not recognize me. The boys call me Uncle John, and I am confidentially in the employ of Major Martle. Just treat me the same as you would him, and it will be all right."

"Blamed ef I don't!" growled Harrington.

"I don't reckon there's much coin in you, but I wouldn't wonder ef thar was a heap ov fun, an' I'll try it on. Ef ther major don't like it he can lump it. This bird's in ther hand, an' we ain't goin' ter lose no time. Ef we tried ter go back, thar might be some healthy old snags in the way; ef we turned him loose, he might have sense ernuf ter make this gang heaps ov trouble; an' ef we spilled any slops on ther trail, it might strengthen up any hounds behind, so they'd follel us there an' back ag'in."

"But what in thunder be yer goin' ter do with him?" whispered the man at his back.

"Take him along. Thar's no tellin'. Mebbe that's what he's fur. Ther major don't come, an' this feller does; it wouldn't be safe ter drop him till we knows, an' we dassen't turn him loose. I tell yer, Billy, you'll hev ter go back an' find ef anything's bustled, er wot's bercome ov Martle. Yer kin meet us ag'in nigh ter ther Black Knob; an' yer might tell ther boss that Bart Harrington advises him ter come along. I don't jest like ther way things looks."

"But, say! I'm goin' back inter a heap ov danger, when it's knowed you fellers hez turned up missin'. I'm strikin' him fur gold, an' ef he don't pony up I'll fix him sure ez I'm a man ov peace."

Billy did not want to appear too anxious; but he saw his chance, and intended to be open to conviction.

"You git, anyhow. Fix it ez yer choose with him; but ef yer go back on us, er make trouble so we don't git *our* divvy, yer dead meat!"

Billy nodded coldly, and took his departure. He suspected the mayor, and felt that if he was out of the game, the value of the captive was hardly equal to the market price of the danger. When he was gone, Bart and his men pursued their flight at a rapid pace, taking with them both captives.

Selka had heard very little of the conversation, but there was something about the presence of Uncle John that puzzled her. He seemed to have come in place of some one else that was expected, yet his treatment from the start had been of the rough-and-tumble kind, and was growing worse. As a prisoner, he was more closely looked after than herself.

She had nothing to complain of in the matter of respect, and they certainly did their spitting as gently as they could. Beyond the threats that were at first addressed to her, not a word

was said; even a guarded question or two of hers received no answer.

Where she was going was more than she knew; and though she tried hard, she could not identify Ike Muldoon in any of the men. Her only hope was that he had been sent for by the man who went back.

She began to understand the boldness of the game, and wondered what Elsie would say in the morning when her absence was discovered. Had she suspected the flight of the woman she had, for so many years, called mother, she would have been more alarmed for her than for herself.

And very good reason she would have had, since Elsie's danger was a great deal more deadly; while the wonder was that the first terrors of the journey did not set her wild.

Yet the Frenchwoman was made of stronger stuff than Selka thought.

She could shiver and moan, and weep over the idea of losing her daughter; but her own personal danger would not move her a particle. She rode on through the night with a courage that never faltered. To her it seemed that some mistake had been made; and that the further she got away from the Gulch the more was Selka's safety assured.

Yet once or twice, after the moon rose, she fancied that she had a glimpse of some one following on the trail. It might be only one of the gang bringing up the rear, or even a casual traveler, pursuing the same course, but she took a grain of comfort out of it, and it helped her to bear up. She was careful not to look rearward too often lest she might do some damage to the possible friend behind.

As they advanced the country grew wilder, and at last she saw no more of the flitting figure in the rear. In spite of her best efforts the surroundings began to strike a chill to her heart. In a little glen they finally halted.

"Boys," said the leader, "yer knows thar's big pay fur this job, fur it's an ugly one. Yonder's ther Leadbank shaft an' to-morry ther's got ter be suthin' at ther bottom ov it ez'll never be found. Thar ain't ter be no flunkin' er funkkin', but I've thunk ov a way ter let yer down easy—"

"Easy ef yer can," retorted one of the others.

"After we did ther fine work, an' runnin' our necks right in ther shadder ov ther noose at ther Gulch, it 'pears ter me ther boss might sent some 'un else out hyar ter finish up ther job. I'd dock half my pay ter git outen ther rest ov it."

"Oh, dry up on that. I'm sayin' ernuf about it 'thout ary chin-music from ther balance. It's got ter be did; an' thar ain't any man hyar ez ain't goin' ter hev his hand in it. What I war goin' ter say are this: At five rod thar ain't a man hyar what ain't a dead shot?"

"You bet."

"Ef not we'd 'a' bin took in afore this."

"That's fun fur leetle gals but a Hair-pin thet couldn't hit center at five rod—waugh!"

"Wal, what I've got ter say are this: I 'magedin' thar might be a leetle kickin', so I studded it out. We'll draw ther bullits in all ther guns but one, an' we'll take ther guns ez they come. *Somebody* 'll hit her at five rod; but we'll never know who. Ther stiff goes down ther shaft an' we all waltzes off, an' never anybody 'll know who done it. Are yer all willin'?"

"In course," was the substance of the general chorus. "We stands in with Hair-pin, and we do ez he says. Git yer guns ready an' hev it over. It's O. K. an' the sooner it's did ther better."

Elsie heard the conversation and then saw the preparation being made. She could doubt their intention no longer, and her eyes dilated with horror, while her dry throat refused to utter a scream.

"Sorry, mum, but biz are biz, an' we shell hev ter leave yer hyar," said the principal ruffian. "Unless yer would like ter jump in on yer own accord, that would leave us all out, but I'm afeard yer ain't reasonable ernuff. Thar! That'll do. Stand stiddy ef yer please; ef yer can't, take a squat. It'll soon be over."

Quite coolly the first villain led the now almost fainting woman to a spot where she made the faintest kind of a mark, and with a few quick turns of a rope bound her quite securely.

"Now then, I'm takin' ther chances along with yer. Ready. Aim!"

The two words rose sharp and stern on the night air.

And then, with a horrible screech the outlaw bounded high, and fell again, while once, twice, thrice, shot after shot rung out, as many men dropping in their tracks; while the sole survivor, flinging away his empty gun, by a tremendous side-bound sprung into the shadows, and rushed madly away.

"A very fair clean up," remarked Charley Sands, stepping into the open from his hiding-place in the bushes.

"It's a great pity I lost the one nugget in the tailings; but then a man can't have the earth. Who is the female, and is she badly damaged? I don't suppose the health of this corner of the globe will be A Number One shortly after that

fellow gets done running, and we had better prepare to git. Ah! It's Elsie Dupin—what in all creation is she doing here?"

But Elsie answered no questions, only looking up at him in dumb terror; and then, as he cut away the cords, she sprung from him, and dashed wildly up the mountain slope.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A SUDDEN DISAPPEARANCE.

THE unexpected appearance of the man whom, at the Gulch, he had been accused of murdering, was a genuine surprise to Morton.

He had felt reasonably certain that Herman Graunt would take good care of himself, knowing of his danger as he did, and he could hardly believe his own eyes.

What made him the more surprised was the trouble they had taken to get him in their clutches on the charge of his knowing Graunt's whereabouts. If the trail had not been totally lost they would hardly have run such risks.

Yet here was the man he had left as a bed-fast cripple at Bumble's Bar; and he had not only recovered his strength to a wonderful extent, but morally he was a different individual.

"Mighty sowy, old chappie, taw see yaw in sech qua'taws," said Morton, in tones of real regret, "but glad yaw have picked up a bit. When I left, yaw were all brooke up."

The surprise of the dude was nothing to that shown by his friend. He appeared at first even too astonished to speak, though he caught Le Roy's hand, and held it tight.

"Oh, don't take it so habd. We'll come out all wight, and I wanted taw see yaw anyhow. It may cost you some coin, but it's wuth it taw knaw what I've seen."

"News of my little girl! Thank heaven for the meeting, then, even if our case is desperate! You found her?"

"She—aw—found me, if I'm not gweatly mistaken. See heah, now, I'll tell yaw all about it if yaw keep cool. But we may be all w'ong, doan'tebaw knaw?"

"Scarcely, if you found Elsie Dupin there, and a fair-haired, blue-eyed girl that she called her daughter."

Morton felt that way himself, and yet he did not wish to speak too positively. Had he been able to have the interview with Elsie that he spoke of he would have been able to talk by the card.

Yet there was no reason why he should not tell the whole truth; and so, in a brief way, he gave a history of his adventures so far as Selka was connected with them.

Graunt listened without interruption, save now and then an ejaculation, though the recital was exciting enough.

He even restrained himself, though his teeth were tightly clinched and his brow knit ominously while he heard of the abduction; but his face became thoughtful again at the mention of Major Martle. For some reason that he could hardly have explained Morton did not mention the "jontleman an' schoolar" at all in that connection.

"And now she is in safety, and so often warned, she will be likely to guard herself well! A thousand thanks for what you have done. I knew I was making no mistake in trusting you. She has blue eyes?"

"Blue as the heavens."

"And golden hair?"

"Yellow as gold, and fine as silk."

"Ah, I understand. Heavens, yes! There can be no doubt. I remember now. You say she is called Selka, that is her old pet name—or as near to it as one would come who wished to preserve something of the sound and yet lose the sense. We called her "Silky" on account of her long, fine, bright curls. She has the name yet, though no doubt she has forgotten who gave it to her. She is beautiful you say?"

"As an angel."

"Morton, my boy, you are hard hit, or I am no judge. It it not so?"

"Why should I deny it? I adoah her. Graunt, old chappie, I'll tell yaw, aw, the twuth. I, aw, came down theah to find her. I saw her at school, and was stwuck all in a heap. I wevolved wound that school-house like a condemned lunatic, twying to get anotheab glimpse foah two weeks, then I found she had left. I hunted her down, I did, and met you on the woad, though of cawse I didn't knaw."

"Spoken like a man. There are worse fellows in the world and I rather hope that Selka—as you call her—will have sense enough to see it. For that you must stand your chances."

"But from what you say, she is in danger. In one guise or another Herman Knight has been at the Gulch, and is trying to strike me through the child. We must find her and protect her."

"It stwikes me, ab, that we're in some little dangah heah, ourselves. At least, yaw're in the hands of men, ab, that will make you come down heavy to get away."

"I care not for that; of the men who simply seek gold I have little fear. It is the man who lives for revenge that I fear. Oh, he is Satan himself. And fer myself I fear him not—I never have feared him. It was only when I thought that I might lead him to my child that

I grew weak and cowardly. Now that I know the worst and feel assured that he has already an eye upon her, I can fight till the last gasp."

"But these woad-agents? They want twenty thousand dollars and if they don't get it I'm pwetty su'ah they'll hang us both," persisted Morton, who was not so much wrapped up in his thoughts of Selka that he could not see the present danger.

"What, ah, do you propose to say to them in the morning?"

"I don't propose to say anything if I can help it," answered the other quite coolly.

"We must escape to-night."

"My platfoam exzactly, old chappie; but how's it to be done?"

"I don't know yet; but it has to be done, and when we look around we'll be apt to see how. There's nothing that brightens a man up like seeing death on the other side of the fence, grinning at him."

"Dwive on then. I want taw be su'ah yaw're willing taw take the wisk. I was going to look wound myself. But, say! Don't it stwike yaw that Herman Knight may have something to do with this gang of woad-agents? He has an eye on Gwound Hog and don't yaw fohget it."

"A thousand curses! Yes, it may be so. If I have the chance before I get away I'll find out. If I thought so I would put a knife through him when he came near me, if I died the next moment."

"Well, well, don't get excited. He's not neah now; and whah's yaw're knife?"

Graunt held up one hand warningly; with the other he showed a broad-bladed serviceable-looking bowie, that he had worn concealed in his boot.

"I'm not a desperate-looking man, and they didn't think it worth while to search me very closely. Why, when I talked to those road-agents I was the most mild-mannered man you ever saw. I didn't want to make them afraid of me—till the time comes."

The torch, that had been stuck in the crevice of a rock was still burning, but was getting low, and it was time that they looked around.

A view of the cell was not very encouraging; though they could hardly have expected to find any other outlet than the one which they had entered, and at which they knew a guard was stationed. It was simply a pocket in the rock. There were cavities and crevices, but nowhere any spot that looked as though there might be an opening to the outer air or any place where, with any facilities that they had, a tunnel could be driven.

"No use talking, Morton; then we'll have to make a drive right for the door, and run the chances, when we get outside. I'll go ahead and knife the guard. If he fires when I show up you can use your judgment. If he don't—stay in the dark till he does or I give the signal. I'll show them what Horton Graunt can do and dare."

For a prisoner, possibly in the hands of a man who hated him to the death, and anyhow surrounded by men who would a little rather slay than save, to Morton he appeared very brave, or very boastful. Yet the dude was not one to hesitate in following a lead, and he had nothing better to propose.

"All wight, my fwient. I'll be just wheah yaw want me. But hadn't yaw better wait a while till they settle down? It's early in the evening."

"That's just the chance that we have. They won't be looking for anything new; and I'll wager a fortune that they'll double the guards before daylight. This fellow outside has no more idea that we will try to get out in his watch, than he has that he will be in Heaven or the other place within the next hour. If you've nothing else, that's the game, and the sooner we get at it the better. What do you say?"

"I'm always weady. When you are, sail in."

Le Roy shook himself together and gazed at the passage. He thought that as there was a man watching the other end with a cocked revolver, the first out would be likely to go down.

"Follow me, then! Hark! What in the fiend's name is that?"

"Somebody with a Winchester, and I shouldn't wondaw if it was Cholly. Naw's your time."

Without waiting for the answer, Graunt darted into the passage, and Morton followed without hesitation. Buried as they were under the rock there was not much chance to judge of the distance or direction of the sound. A repeating-rifle was very industriously at work not very far away, and there was a commotion in the camp. A better moment for their venture could not have been found.

The sentinel had turned toward the sounds, when Graunt, with Morton close at his heels, came out like a tiger and sprang upon him. One blow, and the man went down.

They were free to begin their flight. Any little noise that had been made was lost in the din beyond.

"This way!" exclaimed Graunt.

"We never could cross the chasm over which we came, with half a dozen holding it. Our only chance is to follow this trail in the opposite direction. We may find an outlet, even if it takes us miles out of our path."

He did not pause for an answer, but dashed away, and Le Roy followed.

For ten minutes or more they pursued their headlong flight, Graunt leading the way with a marvelous accuracy, never hesitating, however rugged the road.

The pace grew too hot for Morton.

He began to pant for breath and drop behind. He called to the other, but the cry was not heeded. Graunt pressed straight on, and in another moment Le Roy found himself alone. He listened, but there was no sound of footsteps, and though he looked keenly and anxiously he could find no sign of a trail. The man had utterly disappeared.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

STRAIGHT TO SELKA.

It was fortunate that the disappearance had not taken place sooner, for Morton might have found considerable trouble in making his way through and over the mile or so of rocks and chasms that they had thrown behind them.

Now, with the moon up, and something very like a natural roadway stretching out before him, there was no reason why he should not make rapid progress, though he was not willing to leave the spot until he found out what had become of his friend.

But it was not so easy to even make a guess. It was impossible for him to have come back on his trail, and had he gone forward he would even yet be in sight. On the one side was a chasm, down the precipitous side of which he could hardly have fallen, and which he certainly would not attempt to descend. On the other was a perpendicular wall of rock.

At the latter Morton gazed, and shook his head. It seemed possible that this was the direction Graunt had gone, though it was strange he had uttered no word of warning or alarm.

Some fifty feet above there was a niche in the rock and a projecting pine. Suppose a lasso had been swung from that spot and Horton Graunt drawn up? It might have been done. Crouching under the shadow of the neighboring rocks he gazed upward, debating in his mind whether it was possible to ascend, and finally speaking aloud.

"It don't look weasonable, but something tells me it's true," he muttered.

"But I cawn't get thah fwom beah without wings, and the only chawnce is to go wound and find some othaw way. I cawn't stay beah and wait, and then he may have gone on ahead, don'tehaw know?"

It was only a moment that he lingered there, making up his mind. Then he went forward at a much more deliberate pace.

As he heard no sound of pursuit there was no pressing danger; and he needed to slacken his exertions to recover his strength. Mr. Morton could do something of 'most anything; but rapid mountaineering was not exactly in his line. Horton Graunt could beat him at it about two to one.

While he went along he could think. It might seem that he was deserting his friend; but there was nothing to be gained and everything to lose by lingering there. If Graunt had been recaptured his best plan was to get out of here as soon as possible, and try and find a way to the rocks above. If as he suspected, his friend had been drawn up, it might be that his own presence remained unsuspected, and there was an opening for him to help his friend if he could reach him before he was taken back to the outlaws' camp.

As long as the way was so plain there was no need for any delay; and he had recovered his breath and strength. He went on without hesitation, now and then casting a backward glance, though as yet, somewhat to his surprise there had been no sign of pursuit, beyond the disappearance of Graunt.

He kept a sharp eye to the front, also; and it was very well that he did. He was watching for Graunt; and his eyes fell upon some one else. Two men were coming hastily along.

It was not very likely that they were friends, but whether they were or not he had no desire to be seen by them until he knew. There was no hiding-place at hand but he flung himself down at full length close up to the wall of rock at his left hand and waited their approach. If they had not already seen him they might go by. It would take a keen glance to detect him as he cowered in the shadows.

Luck befriended him. As they neared him, there was the sound of a rifle-shot away back in the rear. The men moved a little slower, their eyes and ears being directed toward the point from which the noise came.

"Thar's some one on this hyar trail, jest ez I war a-tellin' yer. I c'u'd 'a' swore it 'thout hearin' that gun. Ef they're this side er ther gap, mebbe we ain't quite ez safe ez we thort. We got ter find who it are afore we go back. Keep cool an' go quiet."

"Mebbe it's ther boss. Hyar's whar we war ter strike fur, an' like ez not, when he got in too late fur ther fun he jest lit out. Er mebbe Billy's a-bringin' him. He ain't bin hyar lately, an' mebbe can't find ther road. Yer wants ter know who ye'r holdin' on afore yer picks trigger."

"Ef it comes ter that I ain't jest so cert. Ther boss are good pay, an' all that; but ef I dont't disremember he hez a holy sort er way ov hev'n' his pards disrepear. Blame me ef I'd weep ef some 'un would make er mistake. But you jest keep yer eyes skinned that if it should be him he don't fire first."

"An' ef it ain't him?"

"Plug him. Thar ain't nobody else got no biz, skirmishin' 'round hyar."

The two men passed out of hearing, as they talked in guarded tones, but Morton knew enough already. He had recognized Bart Harrington and Bob Ridley; and just now, leaving Rakestraw out, there were no two men at the Gulch that he felt less like meeting. If they thought they had him at a disadvantage they would be deadly enough. Even a shot at him, as he lay in the deep shade, though it did not hit him, would rouse up the road-agents.

Yet their presence there was, to say the least, somewhat singular. They did not belong to the Hair-pins—what mischief could they be plotting?

They were hardly out of sight when Morton sprang to his feet and hurried along in the direction whence they had come. There was no tell-how soon they would be back, and it was not likely that the men would again pass him by unnoticed.

For some time he followed this natural roadway, though it grew more difficult as he advanced.

Then it ended suddenly at a deep gorge, the descent to which was steep and dangerous, seeming to be a mass of huge bowlders, piled on one another without much regard to regularity. He went down a few feet; then halted and retraced his steps.

There was altogether too much danger of breaking his neck for him to be on the right track. Bart Harrington and his pard had not come up out of that gorge.

Then they must have come down.

Carefully he scanned the rocks.

In the darkness of the place he could see but little. It was his luck that served him since he hit upon a narrow pathway and without hesitation began its ascent. If he could follow it to the top of the ridge unseen he might be able to fathom the disappearance of Horton Graunt with which, it now struck him, Harrington and his pards might have had something to do.

Very silently he went, careful that his footfalls made no sound, that no loosened stone, tumbling down, should betray his presence. Here one man could easily halt an army, since progress was slow, and nowhere could two walk abreast.

If he expected to reach the dark line that he saw cutting against the sky he was doomed to disappointment. Three-fourths of the way up he came upon a little shelf, where half a dozen men might stand side by side; and at the further end an opening into the solid rock.

"Out of one hole, and into another!" he thought. "Strange that if there are more of the gang here they have stationed no guard. Eyes open, now, and we'll see where this leads to if it takes us to the infernal regions."

Slowly and carefully, yet without hesitation he felt his way along the narrow passage. The moment he passed under its arch he was involved in total darkness. An untried step here might mean sudden death, for though the road might be safe enough for those who knew it, or explored it by torchlight, who could tell to what pitfalls his feet might wander?

When he had gone a dozen steps, and recognized the difficulties before him more fully, he thought of a newspaper and a box of matches he had in his pockets.

Carefully he tore the paper into quarters, and lightly twisting one of the pieces ignited it, holding it high above his head.

The light was not very brilliant but it gave him a view of the passageway, straight as though hewed out of the rock by line and plummet, its damp floor stretching out before him, as far as his eye could reach.

He hurried on, holding his torch above his head until the flame, reaching his fingers, went out. Then for some little distance he strode on in the darkness, until he thought he had about come to the limit his light had penetrated, when he again lit a piece of paper and took a quick look.

"By Gawge!" was his exclamation, made under his breath. "Theah's an end ov some kind. I mustn't make any moah illuminations or some one will be pwacticing long taw with lead mawbles. The woad seems open and not vewy long. Ah!"

He crumpled the paper hastily in his hands, and threw it under his foot, as a sound reached his ears.

"Some one is theah, and talking. If they keep it up I'll have all the gwide I want."

He drew off his boots, felt inside of his shirt for a brace of weapons he had concealed there, and then went hurriedly on. Before he had taken two dozen steps there was a glimmer ahead and after that his way was plain until he felt his feet rest upon a log of wood. He took two or three steps without thought then halted and got down on his hands and knees, trembling in spite of himself.

Feeling on either side he was convinced that he had not been mistaken, though to make assurance doubly sure he lit a match.

Then he could see that he was kneeling near the center of a single log, that bridged a chasm of unknown depth. The ends of the log were sunk into the rock, so that its surface was flush with the floor of the passage, which here had widened out into a small cave. Had he not kept his eyes upon the light, and held his course straight for it, he would have stepped off, no doubt, directly into eternity. But the light, and his own good luck had saved him.

Slowly he made his way across, and on the other side examined the log. There was a rope by which it could be raised; and he lost no time in securing his rear. It was a good thing for him that Bart had chosen to explore the gulches below. It gave him the chance to get in, and to keep the others out.

The feeble light hardly grew much stronger, and now and then he heard again the voice in almost as low a tone as ever. Light and speaker were evidently in another apartment. He crept still closer, and then, to his utter amazement, recognized the voice as Selka's.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SELKA SHUTS HER EARS.

MORTON thought rapidly.

Bart Harrington's presence was explained, since Selka was here and a prisoner; but why had he brought her hither?

Most likely Major Martle was concerned, but his object was a mystery; and he did not waste time trying to solve it. While Bart was absent was his opportunity, and he intended to make use of it. It was not likely that there were many in the gang, and just then he felt willing to face a dozen.

Still, he was reasonably cautious. He wanted to see to whom the girl was talking, and get a glimpse of the lay of the land.

No doubt there were guards; but they were careless enough, since he had passed this far unquestioned. Probably, with Harrington and his pard at the lower end of the passage, and access so difficult, no doubt it seemed safe enough; and so it would have been had the log been raised. But all that Morton had to do was to be silent and advance toward the light.

The opening was small and irregular—a crack in the rock, that was some eight or ten feet long. Beyond that a small cavern spread out, illuminated in one corner by a flaring fire, the glare from which had guided Morton in safety. Between the fire and the crevice where he crouched two persons sat, conversing. As they were bound hand and foot, they could not do much else.

There was no one else in the apartment, and, though their voices were low, the silence was so complete, that every word reached the listener's ears.

"It may be," Selka was saying. "He is a strange man, cruel and cold; and he made a rash vow in my hearing, that I laughed at then, but which does not seem nearly so wild now. Yet, I feel loth to believe that he is such a villain; and I cannot understand why he should run such risks. He must have known how I would hate him after such an insult as this—that I would slay him sooner than it should go unavenged."

"But had his plans worked as he intended, you would have never known. He would have been captured with you as I was captured. I simply—knowing of his plan—took his place. In spite of the seeming roughness with which I was treated, they handled me very gently while they thought it was the major they had; and even now they are uncertain whether I represent him or not. If they were not suspecting him of bad faith, I could impose upon them a great deal easier."

"Does he think I am a babe? Even then I could have seen through it all."

"Perhaps, if you had made your escape together, a hundred miles from this, in the depths of the wilderness, you would not have cared to see through it. Oh, he is no fool; and he stops at nothing. If I was only sure—if I was only sure!"

"Of what?"

"That he was the man who murdered Horton Graunt."

Selka gave a scream.

"Horton Graunt! What know you of Horton Graunt? It was Le Roy Morton who slew him. They have taken him back to hang him. I could not believe it; I did not believe it; yet mother said it was so; and when they came with the warrant and took him away, I could doubt no longer."

The two were both excited. Uncle John had not heard the particulars of Morton's arrest, and had seen but little of the dude. Selka's charge was more than a surprise.

But that she should know aught of Horton Graunt, or have the interest in him that her words implied, was stranger still. He could only answer her question by another.

"And who are you, with his history so ready to your tongue?"

"Who, but his miserable daughter!"

Uncle John struck his forehead with his

hands. The cords at his wrist prevented the gesture from being as impressive as it would otherwise have been; but his words added the emphasis.

"Ab! Fool that I was! I understand now—if this be so. Yet I cannot believe it. Girl! If you are Horton Graunt's daughter, and can prove it, you are worth a million."

"A million! What is that? I would give it all to have justice done to the man that murdered my father."

"And that man till this present moment I believed was Major Martle."

"And I know it was the man who calls himself Le Roy Morton—the man who twice saved my life, and yet had taken his."

"Pardon me!" interrupted the voice of Morton himself, and the young man slipped silently toward the spot.

"It is a gweat, a howible mistake—one that cwushes me to hear of. Horton Graunt was my fwiend—he picked me up when I was dwounding, he saved my life. The chawge was all a lie—part, ah, of a plot. Not a wo'd of twuth in it; and I can pwoove it."

Again Selka gave a cry; but this time it was as much of anger as of surprise. Regardless of their position her voice rung through the cavern.

"You villain! Are you here? Has the law lost its gripe? Can justice never be done? I am your prisoner, am I? Do not think you will triumph to the end. I live, and some day when my hands are free, and hold a weapon, you will learn that murder must be avenged."

"Listen to me first. Pwerhaps, afterward, you will not ca'h to stwike. If yaw do—my life is at yaw're disposal. Thah is little time to talk if I want to save you, so I must be bwief."

"You save us!" broke in Selka. "I can imagine the wolf saving the lamb; the tiger the fawn! While I live your neck is never safe. Away! You cannot befool us now."

"Yaw speak bahnd words to one who would die foah yaw. Bettah be saved now and listen to me aftahwards. One wo'd will convince you."

As he spoke he drew from its hidden case a knife, and deftly cut from her wrists the cords.

"I refuse to hear you!"

Clapping her hands to her ears she would have sprung back, but Morton caught her wrists in a firm though kindly grasp, and brought them down, while, as unruffled as ever he whispered.

"Foah the best of weasons—Horton Graunt still lives."

"It is false!" she panted. "As false as your own false face. He died, at your hands years ago. Mother saw your face on that dreadful night, and never forgot it. She warned me, but I did not believe. Then came the tardy arm of the law, reaching for you at last, and I could doubt no longer."

"But, ah, my deah girl! If you mean the night the house was burned and yaw spirited away, I was a youngstah not ten yeas old, and had nevah been outside of N'Yawk City."

"See how your own lips condemn you. You know all the terrible story."

"Because, ah, Horton Graunt told it to me himself. I was with him this vevy night. We were both captured by the woad-agents—Ha'pins they call them—and we made our escape togethah. If he was heah, doan'tchaw knaw, he would tell yaw the same thing."

"If he was here? But why is he not? Did you shoot him in the back; or desert him when pursuit was hot?"

Yet, in spite of her scorn, Selka was a little staggered in her unbelief. Perhaps his positive words awakened hope in spite of herself. She was willing to listen now, and waited breathlessly for his answer.

"If theah was any desertion he was the one who did it. He outwan me and disappeared. He may be in the hands of the Ha'pins again, but I am almost pwsitive he ascended the wocks, and twying to find my way upwa'd I found yaw. Yaw're fwiend weally must excuse me. Pwehahs it would be bettah if we all went to search foah him."

Uncle John had been silently listening to the conversation, and keenly watching the speakers. If Major Martle's eyes could have fallen on his face it is quite likely they would not have recognized his whilom clerk. When Morton, remembering him at last, loosened his bonds, he gave a sigh of relief before he answered:

"You speak so positively that one would almost believe you in spite of himself. Of one thing I am certain. You are not a tool of Major Martle's. How you came here I can not guess, since you must have passed two of the men who brought us to this villainous place. There are more on guard on the other side. Unarmed as we are it may not be so easy to go anywhere. If we could get out it would be better to attempt to take this young lady at once to her home. If Horton Graunt has taken care of himself this far, he can be trusted to protect himself until we can bring him aid. Against such gangs of outlaws we can do little else than lose our own lives."

"Shpoken loike a jontleman an' a schoolar," interposed another voice, as a man bounded in.

"But sure it's Ike Muldoon that don't keer fur thim outside, at all, at all, an' he'll pade yez ter glory in shpoite av all ther thaves in Christendom. Folly me!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE DUEL AT DAWN.

THE appearance of Muldoon was a surprise all round; but it was not altogether an unwelcome one. To Morton, the Irishman had been a mystery. He could not understand why he was mixed up with the major in the designs of the latter against Selka or how he had proved his loyalty to the girl, though he did not doubt him. He had seen enough, however, to cause him to suspect that Ike and the major each had a hold upon the other, and that since the first fiasco of Muldoon, war had been declared between the two.

The same might be said in regard to Selka; though there was much to be added. For some days she had been desirous of having an interview, feeling sure that he could make important revelations when the time came. She had kept his secret in regard to the farcical nature of the first abduction, and his share in it, and had brought herself to believe that it was done in her interests.

And any way it might be, she had a good deal of confidence in the man, for which she never asked the reason.

"Oh, you have come at last," Selka exclaimed.

"I thought I would not be deserted. And, friend or foe, you are at least honorable. What you say I can believe."

She held out both her hands, and Muldoon took them as a matter of course.

"Thru' fur you, me leddy. Whin Muldoon sp'akes it's because he sez somethin'; an' he moight say a b'ape jist now, but it's a betthor toime fur walkin' than fur talkin', an' the sooner we get out av this ther betthor. Oi seen me chance an' shlipped in; but Oi'm not so sure there's a chance ter shlip out. There's three av 'em wid sixes outside ez are watchin' what's goin' on down ther trail. Ef we can't b'ate 'em we kin foight 'em, but mebbe they won't be lookin' this way."

There was no mistake about his anxiety to be gone, and as he proposed to do all the fighting, perhaps he had the right to dictate. There was an additional reason for haste in the smothered "hallo!" that came to their ears.

"That's that?" inquired Muldoon, holding his pistols at a ready.

"That, ah, is Bart Harrington and his pawd. They are twying to get back, but I'm afwaid I have blocked theah little game. The bwidge is now on this side of the chasm. Unless they can go awound I doan't see how they're to get ovah."

"Av it's only a matther av a bridge they'll get here soon enough. Sure, there's more than wan way to the woods. Let's be goin'. Ther spalpeens are in di'd earnist."

The shouts of Harrington and Ridley not having brought any answer, they fired a shot or two from their revolvers. Never once thinking of any one having discovered the secret of the passage, it was natural for them to suppose that the men on guard over the prisoners had raised the log through an excess of caution.

"If theah's anothaw way they'll find it. If not, they will wait for theah pawds to come back. If we don't tell them they'll nevah know we ah' heah till it's too late. Let us follah Mistaw Muldoon."

Morton had noticed that Selka shrunk back, but he had mistaken the reason. It was not that she feared to advance, but that she wished to take her place by the side of Uncle John.

"Shtip loightly," whispered Muldoon, and he turned toward the opening.

There was a steady ascent along the passage by which Le Roy had entered the cave, and through that on to the outer air, so that he found that they had almost reached the crest of the heights which he had wished to scale. All that was left to do was to scramble up a little gulch, which was almost invisible from above.

When they had completed this last ascent they found themselves on the edge of a succession of parks. A beautiful country it was, that stretched back from the gorges and the outlying mountains, but very lonesome. A few prospectors had penetrated its recesses and returned without finding color, so that thenceforth it was let alone. Population followed the trend of the gold placers and the quartz. But for them there would have been no Ground Hog Gulch, and no settlements further on.

"Wan av ther three's down yander—an' he's did," said Ike, speaking softly, indicating the direction by a wave of the hand. It was a slight variation on what he had already said.

"Oi had ter kill him; an' sure it war a barrud task an' him all unbeknownst to it. The itther two went shtrollin' off yanderwards, lookin' fur somethin', an' it's meself thinks we ought ter say phat they war goin' fur. Wad yez have any objections ter shtayin' here till Oi found them? Wan av yez could bowld this against a dozen comin' from ther cave."

"Let me, ah, go with yaw," interposed Mor-

ton. "It would be bettah to provide foah them befoah we begin our retweat."

"Kim wid me then. Oi'll arrum Uncle John, an' he kin protect ther leddy. We won't be gone long."

Uncle John simply nodded his acquiescence, and took the revolver offered him. Selka drew near to him again, and the two men set out carefully on the trail of the missing ones. It was doubtless something of importance that took them away from the vicinity of the caverns; and Muldoon had good grounds for thinking it would be well to know why they had gone.

Morton was the more willing to accompany him because he might learn something about the fate of Horton Graunt; though he didn't care to speak of him before Selka.

They went along cautiously, but in a few moments were out of sight of the two left behind.

Then Muldoon turned sharply.

"Say here, young mon. I may be only a little, rid-hidded, no-account Oirishman, but Oi'm runnin' this outfit. Whin Oi say, lay low, yer wants ter sing small. D'ye moinde, now?"

"Good gwacious, Mistah Muldoon, I, ah, don't want to wun this affaih. Put me whah I'll do the most good."

"All roight thin. Git in behindt, an' say that yez stay there till Oi gives the worrud. Things are goin' on alltergither too purthy. Ther's a backsit comin', an' Oi want ter be riddy fur it."

"I'm agweable; but if yaw could mentyun what yaw expect?"

"Oi expict ther's a woman up hyar az baz made a fool ov hersilf. Oi didn't want ter allarm ther young leddy, but av it goes as Oi soospict, Oi'll send yez back whoile Oi take ther trail. It poozzles me quitoe."

Morton saw that the Irishman was watching the ground carefully, besides keeping a sharp lookout ahead; but as he had no hint of what Muldoon had been doing he did not understand. He would have asked questions but he held up his hand in warning.

"Whist, now! It's there they are, afther all. Phat is goin' on? Be ther powers! It looks loike a jewel."

CHAPTER XXXI.

TWO OLD PARDS PART.

ALTHOUGH he had little to guide him, Morton had not been far wrong when he made a guess as to how his friend had vanished so quickly. Only, as he did not know him as well as he thought, there was an element of error in his calculations.

Sure enough, Horton Graunt went up the face of the rock; but at the moment the dude was gazing upward the other was looking down, and there was some astonishment expressed on his features.

"The youngster has more gumption than I thought," was his muttered comment.

"I could have sworn he would have run on to the end of the trail. Then it ought to take him until about morning to pick his way over and down the rocks; and I could have overtaken him before he fairly got started on the way to the Gulch. How does he think I could get up here?"

The actual fact was that, when he had outrun Morton, just at this little twist in the trail he sprung sharply aside, and looked upward.

From the tree that Morton noted dangled a rope. He had certainly expected it to be there, and without hesitation he commenced its ascent, hand over hand.

The exercise was severe, but he was accustomed to it, and without pause or hesitation he reached the niche in the rock, and then drew the rope up after him before stretching himself at full length on the little table of stone that had received him. The knotted end of the cord had just passed through his hand as Morton looked upward.

While the dude was peering up, the man lay very still; when he seemed to have satisfied himself Graunt rose and slowly made his way on upward.

The road was not so difficult as it looked from below, and presently he was on the same level that Morton reached some time later.

Then he turned to move from the spot, but before he had taken half a dozen steps he halted and filled his hands with revolvers, brought from some unseen belt under his clothing.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

He spoke sharply, his right hand covering the figure of a man who was striding unconcernedly toward him.

"Halt it is," retorted the man, drawing a pistol which he had ready for his hand.

"Who are you that stops the road? Speak quick, or both of us won't go away alive."

"Hillo! I know that voice, though it has been years since I heard it. Come forward, man, put up your gun, and let's talk matters over. Wolf don't eat wolf; and two shooters ought not to strike up the music until they know the orchestra must play. Shake, old man. I've been wanting a chance to talk at you for some time. What in thunder are you doing?"

With hardy recklessness he advanced from cover, putting his revolver back as he came.

It was not altogether the safest thing he could have done. The new-comer was Major Martle.

He too seemed to recognize the voice of his *vis-a-vis*. Had he not done so he would most likely have shot first and talked afterward, unless he greatly belied his reputation.

"Of all men, dead, buried and lost, you're the very last one I would have dreamed of coming to life. Talk! of course I'll talk; though I've got to keep an eye out for some friends of mine. I suppose you have hardly seen them?"

Martle looked keenly at the other. The answer to his question was a matter of some interest.

"Rest easy, I just arrived from below, and have not come across them. If I had I suppose I would have shot them on suspicion. It's not the safest place in the world to stroll around; and it's just as well that you met me. The boys are lazy, and seem to think a scalp is about as much damage as they have the strength to bring in."

"I don't understand meeting you here. If I had known that I was poaching on your preserves I would have taken another route. I chose this because I knew something about its ins and outs, and so did my friends. We thought the place was vacant, as it had been for years."

"Bless your soul, this has been our headquarters for almost a year; only we kept it dark. A fellow don't want to be raising a muss about his own doorway. While the placers were panning out well we really had a fat thing of it. Since the yield has slackened up I've been arranging to sell out and go into other business. Don't you want to buy the gang? There's one or two of the old members that remember you as lieutenant and captain, and no doubt would not object to the transfer. What do you say? I'm making ready to find a daughter and a million."

"Thanks for the offer. I have just about as big a gang as I want already, and I don't expect to need their services much longer. I suppose it is going to be business to get rid of them. And I expect to get a wife and a million. Perhaps we're both on the same lay. Shall we open up?"

"Perhaps we are. In the times that we were pard, I told you a heap about my private affairs. If ever you struck the girl, you would know she was worth her weight in coin, and would act accordingly. Come, now, be honest. What have you done—what are you doing? It won't pay for old pards to fight."

These men realized that they had come into antagonism, and each would have tried to get the advantage of the other if he had seen the opportunity. They quietly sat down facing each other, and played their conversational cards while they waited for the chance.

Enough has been said to show that each had a game of his own, and knew what the other was about.

"I may as well tell you," said Martle, quite coolly. "I dropped to the heiress in the Graunt case. Found she was very much alive, and a charming young lady. I proposed to make her Mrs. Martle."

"Mrs. Gordon," corrected the other.

"Gordon or Martle, it makes no difference. The former name I found it convenient to drop permanently; the other is good enough for all practical purposes. I proposed to marry her, and as it seemed to me that whatever was to be done had to be done quickly, I went in for taking her by storm. First, I wanted to get up a case of gratitude. That didn't work, so I went in for something else. You see, it is important that she accepts her destiny of her own free will."

"Very interesting; but, you see, as the young lady's father, I should have been consulted."

"You her father?"

"That's the size of it. And I don't see how I could agree to your proposal—at least, for the present. There's another candidate to whom I have promised my parental influence. As I need his testimony, I could not well withdraw from the arrangement. Perhaps, later on, he might prove unworthy. In that case, if you still insisted, and I had discovered by actual possession the size of the fortunes I understand are legally hers, I might be willing to take you into my family. But it looks to me as though it would be more to your interest, and just as economical for me, to make a fair divvy and allow the maiden to please herself."

"You are too generous. Wouldn't it be better if I played my hand out according to the original cards? That would save you from any need of running risks, and make my future assured."

"But my word, man—my word! I gave it to my young friend, and I can't go behind it."

"I am afraid you will have to. The young lady is in my hands at present, and I think she will stay there."

"Ahem! If I understand the story aright, you might have some difficulty in proving her birthright. She disappeared when she was a child. As her father, I would of course recognize her; but I would not suspect you of having good enough memory to be able to convince any doubters that the brilliant young belle of

Ground Hog was identical with the infant you had a glimpse of so many years ago. Why, even Jean Lafitte does not suspect the facts in the case."

"But Elsie knows them."

"Exactly. And she knew me, too. But I fear that Elsie is dead. It certainly would not have been for the interest of either of us to meet her; and you ought to know me well enough to understand that I would provide for contingencies before I undertook the serious part of the business."

He spoke as coolly as if it was an every-day occurrence he was hinting at, instead of a murder, but the shot hit home. The major was not altogether callous—or it was part of his game to seem not to be so. He shivered as he answered:

"You are a fiend. Could you not spare even that poor woman?"

"I spare no one in a game for gold or revenge."

"Then, if I turned the game over to you, don't it strike you that I would walk into a pit with my eyes open? If Elsie's life was not of as much account as half the fortune, I might follow after her to make sure of the balance. No. You have have had the revenge, I will take the gold. If you go into my game with me I'll take you in as a full partner; if you don't—"

"What?"

The major hesitated a moment. His hands were very near his revolver, while the other was as unconcerned as though he was not discussing a question of life and death. Yet the major knew that quick as he might be there was a chance that the chief of the Hair-pins would be quicker; he was a man with whom it was not safe to take any chances.

Martle answered slowly:

"I will play my own cards right along for all they are worth, and run the risks. I don't think under the circumstances you would then care to appear very far up at the front."

"That means we must fight. All right! Will you have it out now, or wait till we have a few more witnesses? I suppose I could drop you where you sit, but in cold blood there's not much difference between our shooting and I'm willing to give you a chance."

"It's just as you want it. I've not been practicing on the pull lately, but off, hand I can drive as many centers as ever. This is an elegant place, and I see the dawn is coming fast. I ought to be moving but I can spare the time to settle this once and for all. What would you propose?"

"Oh, have it all ship-shape and in order. We'll toss for the word, and the one that gets it will give it. At say fifteen paces some one ought to drop."

"That's the best way."

"The only way. Of course this is all pure business—no temper about it. I'm really sorry to lose you, pard—very sorry."

"Not more so than I am. Good-by, pard."

"Good-by."

The two extended their right hands, and, the fingers wove in a friendly clasp. Then they fell apart and the major, balancing a coin on his fingers, called out:

"Heads or tails?"

"Heads!"

The coin spun high in the air and then fell squarely between them, at their feet.

"Heads it is!" said Martle stooping over and lighting a match, though the glow in the east was almost sufficient light to read it by.

"Of course. I always win. I'll say, ready; aim, fire! At ready we draw; at aim we wheel, after fire we go as we please! We can't exactly proceed according to code; but it will be near enough to suit ourselves, and there will hardly be a court of honor held on the survivor. There is nothing more to arrange?"

"Nothing."

"Then we will take position."

They wheeled, back to back, and each deliberately stepped off seven paces.

"Ready."

At the word the two revolvers came out together. There was not a perceptible shade of difference in time.

"Aim!"

As though on pivots the two men turned, each on a heel and faced each other.

"Fire!"

The major threw his hand up like lightning; but the other never raised his at all. There was simply a quick twist of the wrist and a pull on the trigger; then a little flash of flame and the report of one revolver echoing on the mountain-side, through the fresh, morning air.

"He has it," was the cool remark, as the major pitched forward to the ground.

"It was a pity to spoil his face but he was none too good to wear a coat of mail. I wasn't taking any chances, anyhow, and I think that bullet went about as close to the center of his forehead as measurement could put it."

Then, a few rods behind him, a voice exclaimed:

"Heavens! That is Horton Graunt, now!"

"An' begorra," chimed in another voice, "who is he?"

After that came the wild scream of a woman,

CHAPTER XXXII.

AND ELSIE'S PERIL.

WHEN Morton first saw the two men he recognized them, but did not see how he could interfere. The major was out of range of any weapons that he could produce, and had he been closer he would have scarcely cared to shoot down a man who was bearing himself honorably in a duel.

And he only had a few seconds to think it over, since the word was already being given when Muldoon whispered his exclamation of it being a duel; and his own cry in a louder tone, followed close after.

But the scream of the woman was a genuine surprise.

He looked in the direction from whence it came, and saw Elsie standing on a huge boulder that jutted out at the very verge of the precipice. She was staring down at the rapidly stiffening corpse of Major Martle, and wringing her hands, regardless of the fact that at each shoulder stood a man, one hand grasping her, the other poisoning a "navy six." Then his attention was directed back to Horton Graunt by a shout from Muldoon:

"Howld on there! Av yez shoots Oi'll blow yez cowl! Yez might hit ther lamb an' lit ther wolf git away. Oi have yez kivered, an' niver miss."

He had a pistol in each hand, while Graunt had but one drawn, and was facing toward Elsie. The warning came just in time, though no one had seen how quickly the draw had been made on either side.

"All right, my man. The woman is nothing to me. If you want the ruffians to murder her before our eyes, have your own way about it. If you are their pard say the word and I'll have a shot at you, anyway."

"Good gwacious, no!" exclaimed Morton. "Don't you recognize me, Gwaunt? We will save her! They can't get away. And you know you might fiah at the pigeon and hit the cwow. Mistah Muldoon is a friend of mine. You twust him as you would me."

"If you vouch for him, and know what you are talking about, I'll take back what I said, and just tell him that I shoot to a hair, and never miss, either. But, all the same, I don't mean to let the villains get away. They would have the rest of the gang down on us before we could turn around. I guess you remember what that means?"

If the men who had captured Elsie had chosen, they might have got in a good deal of work while this side issue was being discussed; but, unfortunately for themselves, in their pursuit of Elsie they had put themselves in a corner where they would fight to disadvantage; and there was no chance to make a rush. If they opened the ball and failed to make a clean score, it meant trouble for themselves. Having been just in time to see Martle fall, they had a fair idea of what the men before them could do when they shot in earnest.

"See here, pards, we don't belong ter no gang; we're jest honest perspectors," shouted one of the men.

"We struck ther trail ov this hyar bit ov caliker, an' seen thet she war crazy ez a loon. D'yer think we'd 'a' left her hyar ter starve, an' we white men, an' ther pure quill? Not much, when Lafitte, ez runs ther Lame Eagle at Ground Hog, would give a hatful ov coin fur bringin' her in."

"Going to shoot her first and carry her in afterward, eh?"

Graunt's query was natural; but the answer came readily.

"Blazes, no! We heard men a-talkin', then a shot, an' see'd a corpse. What sorter men d'yer s'uppose we'd be if we hadn't pulled an' got ready?"

"Hands up, anyhow, and come down here to do your talking. You tell a tolerably straight story, but we can't run any risks. We'll look after the woman."

"Gwacious, Gwaunt, so yaw know who it is. True as preaching it's yaw're old nurse—Elsie."

"Hush!" was the whispered answer. "There are too many ears to say much now. I recognize the woman; you may think how anxious I am to save her. Yet you heard what they say—that she is crazy. She looks it, and we must move carefully. A single wild movement of hers, and she might go over the precipice. Ah! As I feared! she is lost!"

Elsie had, from her perch, seen the duel, and at the fall of Martle had given vent to her feelings in that one scream, and then stood wringing her hands, apparently entirely oblivious of the men who had seized her. Yet by and by she listened, quivered, and then suddenly broke away.

Two or three steps, and she stepped off into space and shot downward.

The men from whom she had torn herself were dumfounded. The act was done so quickly that no effort of theirs could have saved her.

They made none, however; but stood staring stupidly downward.

The others were prompt enough. All three rushed forward, Muldoon first. The day was breaking, and perhaps there would be light

enough in the gorge to reveal the poor woman's fate.

Then came a shout from Muldoon, a cry of astonishment from the others.

A little below was the top of the tree that stood at the niche in the rocks. In it hung a dark object. It was Elsie, motionless, senseless, but alive.

Side by side Graunt and Muldoon scrambled down, Morton following. In their eagerness to serve the woman, they forgot everything else.

"That lets us out," sighed one of the ruffians left behind.

"You bet it does, an' we'll git up an' dust afore suthin' lets us in ag'in. Ef Bart ketches us hyar, frolickin' round in ther bushes, he'll talk Spanish. It's bin a close squeak; we'd better git back afore he comes huntin' us."

"Pears ter me we had orter plug 'em one apiece fur good luck, anyhow. Reckon we could drop 'em."

"An' s'posin' we didn't. Don't be a blasted fool. We're off our beat, an' ther boss are dead. We'd better kerry ther news ter Bart an' see what he sez. Them don't look like healthy ger-loots ter monkey about. I guess I'm goin' now."

"Goin' goes. I'm right erlong with yer."

The two men had cautiously crept down from the rock. Without delay, though with an occasional glance backward to see if there was pursuit, they hurried off. If Morton had thought for a moment he would have allowed Elsie to hang when she dropped before he would have suffered these men to go back to Selka.

It was an oversight, yet one there was some excuse for. Muldoon had his reasons for managing the rescue himself; and Morton was somewhat new to this kind of business. With the sight before him of a woman in deadly peril he could remember nothing else.

"Hould yer houldt a bit," said Ike.

"Oi'm ther loight weight av ther parthy, and as shtrong in the arrums az the bist av yez. It's Oi that'll climb that tree and hand ther leddy down. Joost moind that she don't shlip through yer fingers. If she does salt won't save yez."

While he spoke the Irishman was acting. Without any apparent effort he swung himself into the branches of the tree, and made his way to Elsie.

She hung in the thick fork of a branch, while some splintered boughs above showed how her fall had been broken. To rescue her from her position took nerve, strength and skill. A fall from them meant death, and it was no easy matter to reach her, or draw her from the place where she was firmly wedged.

"Now thin, Harry, help me down. She's heavy azlead, an' Oi wouldn't wander av she wor did, but Oi don't want to dhrop her. 'Twould be a nasty cowrpse it would make, an' so far the poor girrl looks dacint."

Then Isaac let her down with one hand, dropping her carefully into Morton's outstretched arms. His other hand grasped a revolver while he steadied himself in his position by twisting a leg around a branch, and the axes of his eyes pointed over the shoulder of the dude, in the direction of Horton Graunt.

Elsie once out of his hands he lost no time in swinging down, and between them they carried her up. She was very pale and entirely bereft of consciousness, yet life was there, and there was not much sign of any permanent injury.

"Oi guess her body's all roight," said Muldoon, looking her over in a cursory way, "but Oi wouldn't wander av her moind wor all broke up. We'll know in a minute now. She's goin' ter open her oyes."

"This is vewy interesting, Muldoon, and I'd like, ah, to see the end of it; but don't it stwike you we had bettah leave her with Mistah Gwaunt and go on foah Selka. If you observe, ah, the two wuffians have got away. I wouldn't twust them. They might let down the bwidge."

"Roight yez are," responded Ike, in some concern. "For a jountlemon and a schoolar Oi've showed az little sinse az the law allows. They've tuk the back track fur a dollar an' we must take her along wid us. We can't leave her here, by herself."

"I can stay and watch her," said Horton Graunt looking up. He had been examining the woman with an air that was almost professional.

"I do not think it advisable either to attempt to move her, or to leave her here alone. She has had a violent mental wrench and is temporarily out of her mind, and, I am afraid, is possessed with a suicidal mania."

"It's little toime thin, that we have ter argy ther quisthion, Shtay wid her and we'll hould yez personally responsible. We must be goin', at a gallop."

The case seemed urgent, though they had not yet the opportunity to estimate the full measure of damages. If Uncle John was up to the average miner with the revolver, he might hold the two off until help came, unless he was taken completely by surprise.

Back they hurried, seeing nothing of the fugitives as they went along, until, as they reached the spot near to the entrance to the caverns below, a bullet whistled over them.

And then, at the same moment, each uttered a cry of dismay.

Bart Harrington had found his way to Selka. His left hand was buried in her hair as he held her back over his knee. Above her breast hung his knife, while there was a look on the villain's face that seemed to say he meant to slay.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CHARLEY SANDS INTERCEDES.

ALONE with Elsie, Horton Graunt scarcely showed the concern that Morton would have expected him to evince.

He folded his arms and looked down with an evil smile, watching her as she struggled back to life.

"She is scared out of her wits," he muttered. "I wonder if it is because she recognized me? It might be worth while to wait and see if she knows me now. That infernal Irishman has got me into a corner, and I'm afraid if she does, that Morton and I will have to part company—and both of them retire along with Elsie. Pity, too. After working the dude for all he was worth, it seems such a waste to throw him away. And without him, and his enthusiasm, it won't be half so easy to prove my identity. Confound him! When he recognized me, it seemed quite providential, and I saw my way clear from start to finish. Serves me right for being mercenary. Ah!"

Elsie had recovered her senses, if not her wits. She raised to a sitting posture and stared in his face.

There was no actual recognition, but a look in her eyes as though she thought his name was trembling on her lips, and it only needed an effort to speak it. Her mouth opened. What was she going to say?

Graunt glanced thoughtfully over at the Gulch, and then at the woman.

"It would be very natural for her to jump overboard again," he thought.

"If a person only knew what that wild Irishman's idea of personal responsibility amounts to, it would be easier to decide whether to let her jump. But he evidently suspects me. Why, is a mystery. I saw he was itching for a ruction, and Morton is all that saved him. The woman seems to have entirely too much sense. I am afraid—yes, I am afraid she will have it go!"

He advanced toward her, his eyes meeting hers in a steady stare. He was not framing his thoughts into spoken words now, but something in his face betrayed him. She gave a low, bubbling cry of horror, and shrunk away from his outstretched hand.

He bent a little lower—and then raised quickly. He was no longer alone with her.

"Good-morning!" said a voice. "Glad to see you have stopped her. I picked her out of no end of a difficulty, but she seemed to have things mixed, and ran away. Touch her lightly. I'm her natural protector under the circumstances, and if you don't want her, give her to me."

"And who are you?"

"Oh, I'm the man with the drop, just now. I've taken three scalps to-night, looking after her, and I wouldn't wonder if I had to elevate some more. I'm Charley Sands, leader of the Lame Eagles orchestra, and this woman is a niece of the proprietor of that elegant gin-mill, so you see I must be here or hereabouts. Now, who in thunder are you?"

Sands had described himself exactly when he said he was the man with the drop. He had not much confidence in the average stranger that might be found loafing around, and was as bad as Muldoon in keeping his hand to his weapon. As it was a Winchester, Horton Graunt had an idea that he had heard the gun the night before, and was inclined to believe the sanguinary story, jestingly as it was told. He looked at Elsie as he spoke.

"My name is Graunt, Horton Graunt. Most certainly, of all people, I would be the last to harm her. I just made my escape from the gang of outlaws known as the Hair-pins, who have their headquarters down below in the Gulch. My friend Morton, who I believe is also employed at the Lame Eagle, escaped with me. He and another citizen, an Irishman, all bluster and blow, have gone in search of a brace of villains who had her in their charge, leaving me here to take care of her. She is daft—can you do anything with her? I will be only too happy to leave her with you, if you will accept her, while I go and see what they have done. I suspect, while we are wasting time here, the Hair-pins are mustering their forces, and before we know it will be on us."

"Ahem! Looks as though some of them had been around as it is. I notice a corpse over yonder. At a cursory glance it seems to resemble Major Martle, one of our prominent citizens. What in blazes was he doing out here? Was he a pard of yours; and who took him in?"

Charley had taken a general view of things before he spoke at all, and he was not moving his eyes off of Horton Graunt for the present. He was a little surprised at the truth that seemed to be in the answer.

"That man may have been one of your prominent citizens, but he was a villain all the same, and at one time a leader of a gang of outlaws, who barmed me as man never was harmed. At least he was second in command at the

time the injury was done—and leader afterward of another band called the Hair-pins, of which the present Hair-pins are the regular successors. It may be that he had something to do with the bringing here of this woman; but I knew nothing of her presence until we had settled our accounts. We gave each other a chance, fired at the word, and I got my work in first. There were a couple witnesses of the affair, and if Ground Hog kicks I can't help it. It was his life or mine."

"I can believe you, my boy, but the butt end of the Gulch would hardly swallow your story down as so much gospel. He was a bad man on wheels when you knew his inside, and I owed him one, and so did Ike and the dude. But I can't quite get it through me what all this means. If you're Horton Graunt, you are the man my pard was accused of murdering. They whisked him off between two days; but Charley Sands is hard to beat. I struck the trail. I missed it for a little while, because I was fool enough to think they were really going to Bumble's Bar; but I got my eyes open and struck back, till I hit it again. It didn't take long to show there was a game up. Maybe you know what it was."

"Certainly. These outlaws have been trailing me down with an eye to the wealth they knew I had with me when I struck this region. At Bumble's Bar I made a confidant of Morton, and engaged him to help me to accomplish my mission at the Gulch. Then I gave the outlaws the slip and hid away. They thought they could learn my secret from Morton and brought him here; but they found me also. We were captives together when we made our escape. Since then there have been some strange meetings. This woman I knew years ago. She has been frightened and hurt until she has lost her senses. I remained behind to watch that she did not again attempt to harm herself. If you care for your friend you had better follow his trail. Perhaps you could induce Elsie to go with us. I fear there is danger on ahead."

"Don't you forget it—for the Hair-pins, if they get in the road. Ike Muldoon and that Denver Dude can take just as good care of themselves as any two men living. All the same, I'd like to be in at the funeral, and if you want to wander in that direction Elsie and I will go along."

"Almost anything would be better for us than to remain here. If she cannot walk we might carry her. Four of us together can hold our own. Scattered we will all go under the moment the Hair-pins strike our trail—as they will. It is already dangerously light."

"My idea to a dot. I begin to think if you ain't a square man you're going to act like one. I guess the lady can walk if she will, and if she won't we'll both take hold."

He looked a little more closely at Elsie than he had yet done. Without a doubt Graunt had no evil intentions and it was not necessary to hold the drop.

There was more of fear than pain in her eyes. Now, she seemed to understand either his words or gesture. She rose slowly and with some effort. Her left arm dangled by her side, but she stretched her right out toward Sands, shrinking away from Graunt, who, at the same time, stepped toward her. There was a cut on her cheek, a bruise on her brow, and a number of visible scratches. She had not taken her fall scratchless and it might be that there were other injuries, unseen but even more serious than the broken arm.

Sands looked straight ahead; Graunt's eyes roved around and so he saw something the other did not. They were being flanked by a little band of men.

Graunt held up his hand warningly and the signal was seen. When he looked again the troop had vanished.

Charley Sands was not more hard hearted than the average. He had comprehended something of Elsie's condition from the first, but was not going to give away his advantages until he saw how the land lay.

It was ridiculous, he said to himself, and yet there was a look of murder on the stranger's face, just before he spoke to him. If willing to murder one he might not object to slaying both.

But when he thought it fairly safe Sands could be tender as a woman. He would cheerfully have carried Elsie, heavy as the load would have been, but, feeble and injured as she was she only would lean upon his arm, as with faltering steps she strove to keep pace with them.

Their progress was slow, and Horton Graunt became anxious. He pressed forward leaving them behind. There was a sound of voices, in front, a cry of alarm, the report of a pistol, a scream from Elsie, a crash of fire-arms. Sands hesitated no longer, but catching up the wounded woman dashed forward, in a headlong, staggering run.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BART HARRINGTON GETS HIS DIVY.

ISAAC had made the mistake of being too tender of Selka's sensibilities.

By the merest chance he had seen the major and Billy Rakestraw together, and had managed

to overhear a few words of their conversation. He understood that they were going to find Selka in the country around the Black Knob.

He knew nothing of the abduction; but this put him on the trail, and he followed it to such a good purpose that he left the major behind, and struck Bart Harrington's camp in good time to get in his work.

Selka was his first thought. When he saw Elsie in the distance, with two men stealing away after her, he was surprised but he did not attempt to interfere. It left only one man in the way. He removed that man, after his permanent style, and then left Selka under the care of Uncle John, while he went off to search, without giving a hint of Elsie's presence, or the dangers that might be threatening her. He was afraid to excite the girl, lest she might interfere with his work, for it was his intention to capture the two men if he could, and kill them if he must.

Unfortunately, then, Selka and Uncle John were looking for Bart Harrington and the men that had penetrated the lower recesses of the cave. When the two fugitives came stealing toward them they saw nothing of them until it was too late. Right at their ears rose a voice:

"You thar, stiddy! Hands up an' no foolishness, er ye'r' dead mutton!"

Selka's hand went up; but it was only breast high, as she wheeled. Had she even sprung forward a step as she turned there might have been a chance. Instead, her wrist only dropped into a hand of iron, that gave it a wrench such as she had never felt before; and the revolver she held dropped from her nerveless fingers. At the same time she heard the sound of a hard blow. The other ruffian had taken no more chances, but struck with the butt of his pistol. Uncle John went down like lead.

"Don't pry ter scratch, leetle kitten," growled her captor to Selka.

"The big boss are dead, an' you ain't wuth half ez much ez yer was half an hour ago. I dunno ef Bart'll want yer bad er not, but I guess not. An' ther balance don't, I'll sw'ar. Ef yer goes ter puttin' on frills we'll jest drop yer an' be did with it. Bart kin howl, but you bet he won't try ter bite. How in blazes yer got out hyar, an' heeled, I don't jest see. You'd better 'a' slung yer hoofs while yer hed ther chance, fur sich a thing won't happen ag'in."

"Now, Tom, ef yer man's stiff, jest you go see what's become ov Bart. Thar's got ter be some lively skippin' did, an' ther sooper he knows it ther better."

As he spoke, Bart came rushing out. The check had only been temporary. When, after waiting awhile, he found that no one came to his call, and that no one was likely to come, he looked after his interests himself.

Before re-entering the dark and dangerous passage, he had lit the torch that had served to guide them out. It stood them in very good stead now. He could see the log, and the rope that held it up. Morton was new to the work, and in a hurry, or he would have been more careful. Harrington handed the torch to Bob Ridley and then drew his knife.

"Hold ther light a leetle higher, pard, an' let ther glare shine on ther rope. Mebbe thar's suthin' wrong, an' we don't want ter wait hyar too long. I kin cut ther string, an' you fellers watch an' see that ther bridge don't swing off, an' go chug down berlow. Ef it does we're all in a awful stew. We can't go fo'w'ds an' dassn't go back'ards. Ef any thing bez went crooked with ther boys we kin stay hyar an' starve."

"That's it! Thar she goes—an' cut ther rope ther first pitch. Easy now. We dunno what's left behind, ef ther boys hez cl'ared out."

The log came crashing down and remained more firmly fixed than ever. Bart stepped lightly across, followed more slowly by his companions, and so made his appearance just when he was being called for the loudest.

"What's goin' on hyar?" he shouted.

"Hev you gerloots bin sleepin'? What did yer pull up ther log fur? A sweet old time thar would 'a' bin ef ther men we see'd berlow hed follered us keen."

"Pull up nothin'!" was the surly answer.

"We hed bin a-scoutin', and war comin' back jest loaded up with news when we struck 'em, both loose an' heeled, an' a waitin' fur you ter show up."

"An' yer froze onter 'em. That ain't so bad. Now, what's yer news? It orter be big ter hev took yer away. Whar's Jim?"

"I reckon Jim's dead, ef that's him layin' down yander. But that ain't ther wust ov it. Ther woods are jest goin' ter be full ov corpses, an' we're hyar by ther skin ov our teeth. Thar's mighty bad men on ther trail, an' ther major hez went up ther flume."

"Curses on it! He ain't ther man ter go outen ther damp 'bout leavin' a red mark behind him. Yer sure yer got it straight on ther string?"

"Seen him drop, an' we'd 'a' dropped too ef ther red-headed Irishman hedn't 'a' chipped in fur us. Thar war three shooters thar, an' about a dozen more creepin' up ther bank. I tell yer we lit out in a hurry when we see'd ther chance, an' ef we don't travel soon we'll hev ther hull ov

Ground Hog on our backs. They're all a comin'."

"Let 'em come. Ez long ez we hev ther gal they won't do much from a distance; an' ef they come too close we'll all hand in our checks together. That infernal Billy Rakestraw hez sold us out. I'd like ter live long ernuf ter hev a shot at him."

"Yer off yer eggs a long ways, Bart Harrington. Billy Rakestraw's right hyar. Yer sent me fur ther major an' I brung him; ef he'd stayed with ther man ov peace he'd 'a' bin hyar now. Some 'un hed drugged him—leastwise I hed ter shake him up lively afore I could git him started. But then we come a-hoopin'. He would go swoopin' round, when we got hyar, 'stead ov tendin' ter biz, an' now he's bu'sted wide open. I come on ter see my pards through. Ef they don't want me they kin say ther word."

Billy spoke indignantly, and his hands were at his belt. It was not certain that Bart would not shoot him on sight, since he was desperate over the news of Martie's death, and the closing in of those who could only be foes. They had all received fair advances for their work; but the final payment could only be collected in a warmer atmosphere than they cared to endure. Yet Bart grew a little cooler.

"Couldn't you an' him leave the Gulch 'thout hevin' ther whole burg taggin' after? You've brung 'em hyar; now what yer goin' ter do 'ith 'em?"

"Off ag'in. Them ez are frum Ground Hog got hyar ahead ov me; an' ther balance, which are ther bigger, are bad men ez live hyar. Ef they ain't ther gang ez they calls the Hairpins I'm away off meself. Mebbe we kin strike a trade."

"Trade nothin'! It's too late fur trade an' too soon fur prayin'. Ef they're a-buntin' me down, by the heavens, I'll give 'em somethin' ter hunt fur! Stand erlong side ov me, pards; they're comin' now!"

Le Roy Morton and the Irishman were just putting in an appearance. So far as they were concerned the odds were on Bart Harrington's side for the present at least. Only, Harrington saw what Muldoon and his friend did not—a dozen men beyond their shoulders, and coming quietly but swiftly. It was against them that he sought to rally his men, and as he spoke his pistol swung into line for Morton's head.

The range was a long one, but at the distance a shot like Bart Harrington could drive the center five times out of six.

"Curse you!" he hissed. "I'll square that leetle bill!"

It was just for an instant that his finger lingered—and that was an instant too long for his purpose.

With a bound Selka was at his side. Her left hand struck up Bart's pistol arm, her right snatched at the other revolver in his belt. Had she not been already disarmed she would have slain him without warning. Had she not saved Morton she could have slain his slayer an instant afterward.

The bullet intended for the dude passed a yard above his head, and the weapon flirled out of Harrington's hand at the stroke, but he turned on Selka like lightning, clutched at her hair, wound his fingers in her tresses, and with a wave of cruel strength flung her over his knee, while his empty hand darted for the knife at his belt.

"Curse you both!" he ground out between his clinched teeth.

"This hyar game's bu'sted wide open but Bart Harrington 'll get his little divy. Die!"

The weapon that Selka snatched at eluded her grasp and she was but a child in his powerful hand.

As easily as he had flung her down he raised her up, holding her between himself and the two men, who had halted at the sight as though made of stone. As he said die, he drew back his right hand once more. He had made one motion to terrify; now he meant to make another to kill.

It was only a few seconds that he lost in his madness, but they meant an eternity to him. Shielded as he was by Selka's body, only his gleaming eyes could be fairly seen above her head as Morton threw up his hand and pulled the trigger.

It was a snap-shot pure and simple, but the ball went home as though laid there, and as Selka dropped from the arms of the falling man those of Billy Rakestraw received her.

He stumbled somewhat under the sudden load, but he stumbled toward Morton.

"Go slow, thar!" he shouted. "Ther gal's safe, an' I'm bringin' her in. Ez a man ov peace, I'll do ther squar' thing. Stand by me, Ike. Ain't I yer own side-pard, all ther way frum Bitter Krick?"

With Rakestraw deserting to the enemy, the present odds were in their favor. The two ruffians who had remained at Harrington's back now wheeled and fled.

No one noticed them, since Morton had Selka in his arms, while Horton Graunt, hurrying forward, exclaimed:

"Great Heavens! Can it be possible that I have found my little 'Silkie' at last? My daughter—oh, my daughter!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

KNIFE TO KNIFE.

It was not far that Charley Sands had to run, but it seemed to him at least a mile.

When he reached his friends, he placed Elsie on the ground more suddenly than gently, gave a glance to see that Selka was as yet unharmed, and then, unslinging his Winchester, he hastily deployed himself as a skirmish line of one.

He saw the little troop of men who were cautiously advancing, and guessed shrewdly that they belonged to the Hair-pins. Everybody else was busy, so that it seemed to devolve on him to keep them in check for a few moments.

A dozen yards in advance was a little mound that looked to be just the thing. He ran to it and flung himself down. Then he fired a shot over the nearest man, threw up another cartridge, and saw that he had checked the advance, though he had produced no panic.

He raised his hand and made a warning gesture, that said plainly enough:

"Keep back!"

No shot followed this, though he had half-expected one. Observing narrowly, he came to believe that they were not watching him but the group at his back.

Horton Graunt, Selka, Elsie, Ike Muldoon and the dude were all bunched together, and there was an earnestness about their conversation that seemed to say they had forgotten all about the rest of the world.

He would have liked to have heard what was being said, but since they were all so careless he had to exercise double care, and if they did not come to their senses pretty soon, would have to awaken them.

It looked as though the outlaws might be waiting to see what was the result of the conference; until they made a move, he did not intend to take his eyes off of them. Only, he pitied poor Elsie.

Could he have seen and heard, he would have been more than interested.

The exclamation of Graunt had not reached Elsie's ears since she crouched unnoticed, by herself, just where Charley Sands had laid her down.

The rest heard it.

It was no surprise to Morton. He had expected to hear the words though he had hoped to prepare Selka for them before they were spoken.

On Selka they had a singular effect. She held up her hands, but she shivered like one in an ague fit. Then, when Le Roy would have resigned her to Graunt's outstretched arms she crouched back in his own.

"Wait, wait!" she quavered.

"Who is this?" I do not understand it all. Take me back to Uncle Jean before you tell me more. I cannot bear it now."

Morton said nothing. He was waiting now for Graunt to speak.

"My dear daughter, does not your heart recognize me? Perhaps you have never heard the story of your life. Elsie Dupin was only your nurse. 'Silkie' was the pet name we gave you when we caressed your silken locks, but Ethel Graunt was the name you received at your baptism; and I am your father, Horton Graunt. Your troubles are over at last, since I have found my own."

"Be thy powers! Y'er name's Horton Graunt the same way that moine's Ike Muldoon—bekase yez sez so."

Isaac clapped his hand on the man's shoulder. It fell heavily, and it stayed there, while the other hand covered him with the derringer that had been hidden in his sleeve.

"Ef y'er name is Horton Graunt then, be all the saints, ther's two av us, fur n.e name is that same, and always war aven when they called you Herman Knight. An' Silkie war never bapthoized at all, at all. It's bin a long road, Herman Knight, and you held all the advantages in the start, but I've trailed you to your doom at last. Whatever happens now you can never befool my child; or, through her, clutch fortune and revenge at the same time."

Muldoon's voice suddenly changed its tone. It rung out round and full without a trace of the brogue. He was cool as an iceberg, and looked like a different man, though he had not altered his make-up an iota.

Of all there the man who had been calling himself Horton Graunt was the most surprised. He stared at the supposed Irishman, noting every feature. He was not ready yet to give up the game or he might have tried to shoot, though his second glance showed him how completely the other had him covered.

Whoever he might be he recovered his coolness with wonderful quickness.

"I do not understand what you mean—except that your lie is colossal. If you think that any fear of personal harm will keep me from my daughter, now that I have found her, you are much mistaken. I have nothing else to live for, and if it must be so we can die together. I begin to suspect—"

"Suspect that you are found out, that you have run the length of your tether, that the hour of punishment has come at last; but don't weary us by further effort to keep on the mask,

Whether as Herman Knight, or Hair-pin Harry of more than one gang of outlaws, or the villain you have been all along between, you are found out. Don't move! I hold your life in my hand and I run no risks. For half a dozen years—since I came again to my senses—I have been waiting for this hour."

"It is here, is it? Do you mean to murder me? What else there is for you to do I can scarcely see, since I could crush you with a blow if you gave me the chance."

"Which I do not intend to do."

As he spoke, Billy Rakestraw, with a quick, skillful motion, drew a sharp knife through the belt at his waist, catching the severed web as it fell.

"Ez a man ov peace, it's my jooty ter see thet thar's no shootin' off guns when ther other feller's jest shootin' off lip. Thar's no tellin' what he might do ef yer stirred him up lively."

"Very neatly done, Mr. Rakestraw; you see I remember you of old. If there was any one here to bet with I would lay a wager that your neck would be elongated within the next hour. I don't know that there's any use for foolishness. If you want to murder me you will have to go ahead. If you don't, my turn will come next, and I'll have something to say about old times. Ho, there, you Hair-pins! Let her went!"

He raised his voice in a ringing shout, that could be heard half a mile, and then, folding his arms, looked his foe full in the face.

"You show that you know me well," said the fictitious Muldoon, coldly.

"You might strike a man in the back, or cut a woman's throat in cold blood. I would not. I intend to kill you, yet I mean to give you a chance for your life. Do not count too much on your friends. They will take good care of their own precious selves; and if they didn't, Charley Sands and his Winchester would be better than the whole gang. Yonder is your knife. If you are a man, take it up and fight me to the death. I have a blasted home, a murdered wife, a ruined life to avenge, and to crown all, you would have robbed me of my daughter. The rope would not be enough for you unless I knotted the noose. No hand but mine must slay you."

His words were hot, but they dropped coolly from his lips. He took from Rakestraw the belt of weapons, and tossed toward the chief of the Hair-pins the broad knife. The revolvers, together with his own, he flung at the feet of Morton.

Herman Knight caught up the knife and took a step forward. Le Roy Morton was too astounded by the developments to say a word. Selka looked from one to the other in horrified amazement, while the man of peace, in spite of an anxious glance or two over his shoulder, was evidently enjoying the proceedings to the top of his bent. Just as Charley Sands fired the first earnest shot from his Winchester, the men sprung at each other, and their blades crossed.

"You'll find I haven't forgotten anything since the last time we tried our hands at this diversion," hissed the Hair-pin.

"And you that I have learned a great deal," retorted Horton Graunt, and he emphasized his words by a vicious thrust that no skill could have parried. The other only saved himself by a spring backward.

"Keep up the diversion if it pleases you and amuses the young lady. All I need is time. My boys are coming."

"And Charley Sands is coming with them. There will only be one funeral for all of you. Ah!"

He felt his knife shear through flesh until it grated against the bone, as he parried a stroke and thrust over the other's guard.

Selka turned away and covered her eyes with her hands. She had heard the story of the past and knew that whichever of these men was her father he had good cause to fight the other to the death. It was what she almost vowed to do herself but a few days ago. Yet there was a horror about it all that she had never thought of before.

Though she shut out the sight she could still hear the cling, cling of steel, the rapid rattle of Sands's repeater. Then she felt some one crouch at her side, and looking around saw Elsie, who was looking not at her but at the two furious fighters.

Hair-pin Harry—or Herman Knight—found that the man before him had learned much since last they met. Strength, skill, training—all were as nothing before this little man of steel and fire, who warded his blows, beat down his guard, and at last sent his blade hissing home.

"A poor revenge for all the past, but it is mine," muttered the true Graunt, as he staggered back, more exhausted than he had known, and the blood running freely from a gaping wound on his head.

"Now for the villains who trained to his order."

"Don't worry about them, old man," said the cheerful voice of Mr. Sands, at his elbow.

"I've saved about five of them from all further woes and wickedness in this world, and the rest are climbing off at a two twelve and a half gait. I'm not throwing shots away when

they are out of range, but I think I did middling well while I had them in the box."

Out on the level ground beyond the little mound lay at regular intervals a row of little black heaps. If the Gulch had seen Charley Sands get in that work they would have crowned him "mighty chief" on the spot. They did do it later on.

"Now it's time to look after the wounded. You're hurt yourself, and Elsie has a broken arm, and I don't know what more besides. Better do a little plastering now; they may come back on us after awhile."

He looked first after Horton Graunt. They were pards; and then, if there was any more fighting to be done, it was best to know at once if he was in condition to take a hand.

After all, his injuries were not grave, and he was rapidly recovering from his exhaustion. Sands wiped away the blood from his face, bound a handkerchief tightly over the cut on his head and went on to Elsie, though he gave a nod and a word to Selka.

"It's all right, little one. You can't be expected to gush over such a stranger, but he'll speak to you when he gathers himself together, and go into the merits of the case later on."

"Now, Mrs. Dupin, will you let me see your arm, and are you badly hurt elsewhere? I'm something of a surgeon, and I hope I can set you straight for the time being anyhow."

He saw that much of the wandering look had left her eyes, and spoke to her kindly, but she never heard him. With her sound hand she first caught Selka, and then pointed to the man with the bandaged brow.

"Look! Just as he was that night so many years ago. It is your father, Selka; your father, Horton Graunt."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MR. MORTON WINS.

"I HAD an idea," said Horton Graunt, "that Major Martle might be Herman Knight in disguise. In the course of trailing I had gained the confidence of an Irishman named Ike Muldoon, who was at one time a member of the original Hair-pins. He is dead now; but he told me some of the secrets of the gang, and I assumed his character when I came to Ground Hog. I could not get behind Martle's disguise, but I soon had reason to believe that if he was not Knight he was the man who succeeded him in the command; while he took me to be the original Ike, and laid his plans to use, and then destroy me."

"And yaw, aw, could see yaw're daughtah in such dangah and nevah weveal yawrself?"

Mr. Morton had stayed by Selka, revolver in hand, but when he began to see what complications were arising he watched and waited, though now and then he looked to see if Charley Sands needed any help to stand off the outlaws. He could not go wrong on them. Now he spoke with an indignant accent. He had a warm side for Ike Muldoon, and as Selka's father would have taken his part against the world, but then he had known Herman Knight under the guise of Horton Graunt, and owed him a debt of gratitude, too, scoundrel as he turned out to be. It was just after Elsie's exclamation, and in an abrupt way that Graunt began his explanation. The indignant interruption of the dude gave him no trouble.

"Young man, there was something to learn first. I would know it now. Is she my daughter, or Francois Dupin's? Elsie might well tell any tale that would give to her child the wealth that is waiting for mine."

"For shame, Horton Graunt!" broke in another voice.

"Does not her face tell you all the truth? Where were my eyes that I never saw it before? Look! Here, below her ear—you have seen it a hundred times when you caressed your 'Silkie'—is the birth-mark that no other child could have. When two of us have risen from the dead, what wonder that the third should come?"

From the insensibility that followed the blow of the ruffian Uncle John aroused when the fighting was over and the talk began. He watched the bandaging of Elsie's arm, and listened to the commencement of Horton Graunt's explanation. Then he spoke, and as he spoke he pointed.

"Heavens! It is brother John!" exclaimed Graunt. Then he turned to Selka.

"Yes; and like you following a trail for vengeance. I too traced that man to the gang of outlaws; and then followed Martle as their sometime leader. It was I that gave you warning once or twice, never suspecting who you were, but I could never decide that the major and Herman Knight were one."

He might have said more but he saw that father and daughter had found each other, and never would doubt again.

The Hair-pins did not care to again attack these men, who were well armed and shot center. There were enough bodies to bury as it was, and Horton Graunt left them the corpse of their chief to go along with the rest. For fear that they would neglect Major Martle, and his right hand man, Bart Harrington, he had graves dug for them, and heaped up a mound of rock over each.

When this had been done and the explanations

were over a little cavalcade started for Ground Hog.

The man of peace did not go with it. He submitted that if it was late in the day when he joined the winning side he had been of some service when he came, and deserved to carry a free pardon over a loose foot. If he went back to the Gulch and the excitable inhabitants of that classic burg heard the story of the abduction, they would be apt to rise against him in their wrath, because they couldn't reach his pard. He said nothing of having rifled Bart Harrington's pockets while the battle with the knives had been going on, and he was allowed to drop from the rocks, when once fairly out of reach of the outlaws, and go in peace.

It was very late that night—or very early the next morning—when they reached Ground Hog and drew up in front of the Lame Eagle Saloon. The trampling of the captured steeds sounded like the coming of a small army, and Jean Lafitte, who had been deceived by a false trail and had just returned from a fruitless search, came rushing out. In a moment he had a double armful—Selka, and his niece.

The following evening the Lame Eagle was open for the last time under Lafitte's management. He had sold out during the day, and it was understood that he was leaving the Gulch in a day or so. After his late experience, the full story of which was already public property, no one was surprised.

The orchestra were all on hand—Herr Stein and Mamie Stein, with their honest, round faces, Charley Sands, as *debonaire* as ever, and Morton simply himself, and nothing more. They took their places and played the old programme through without intermission.

Then there was a spontaneous call for Selka, and her appearance was greeted with a burst of applause. She seated herself at the piano, Morton took his violin, and for a few moments there was a concourse of sweet sounds, followed by a thunder of applause as the performers retired to the little waiting-room. There Jean formally disbanded the orchestra, the Herr and his sister receiving a month's salary extra, and turned over the keys of the Lame Eagle to his successor.

The Steins having departed there was an adjournment to the house. The two Graunts were there, and there was a good deal to talk about.

At first Jean and Elsie felt as though they had lost a daughter; for Horton Graunt intended to start at once for the East, and of course Selka would go with him. They said as much, and perhaps they spoke despairingly.

Graunt laughed a pleased little laugh.

"Do you think I don't understand what you have done for my girl; or that I have any idea of separating you now? I don't suppose I can keep her any too long myself; but while I have her, you two can share her. Come with us, of course. Get a house alongside of us if you won't go under the same roof. The Lame Eagle seems to have been a little gold mine and you are pretty comfortably fixed, or I'd insist on sharing all 'round."

"Thanks, my friend, I had thought somewhat so to do. It has been ze wandering life zat I live, it's all be so no longaire. Ze monies got for Selka I made s'all keep us comfortable—Elsie and me—unless Francois s'all come from ze grave."

He looked at Elsie, who shook her head sadly.

She had never told a living soul that she recognized her husband as one of the raiders the night the Graunt residence was attacked, or that she saw him go down with a bullet in his brain.

"And what are you going to do?" asked Graunt of Sands. "Is there any way that I can help you? We've been pards, and I found you there in a heap when you were wanted. My purse is your purse as long as it lasts; and it will be a pretty deep one. If there's anything else—as they say at the bar, 'Name your security.'"

"Thanks, old man. If I hadn't found you level, I wouldn't have stayed with you. There's nothing I know of. I've had a good time here—nerves and muscle got back to their balance—and I'm off in the morning. My old side-pard, Barker, has written me to join him at Alta; Jean has staked me; and the next thing you hear I suppose we'll be running a bank with a full head of steam and the blowers on."

"And a month later be starving. Better give it up, Charley. But if you can't, and won't, and don't, and need me at any time, drop me a line and say what you want."

"Wouldn't it do just as well if I told you now?"

"Of course," answered Graunt, though somewhat taken aback by the suddenness of the application.

"Well, what I want, is to know what is the matter with our friend, the dude?"

Graunt looked queerly at Morton, and the latter flushed, while in spite of himself his eyes wandered toward Selka.

"Because, it's just this way. I did meet the young man at Denver, but he wasn't the same person. He dressed like a Christian and talked like any other man. A fellow don't learn such graces out here in the woolly West. I would have thought he was playing some game; but

he kept the thing up with me. It must be softening of the brain, and if you can coax him anywhere near a lunatic asylum, run him in. That's all."

"There does seem to be something strange about it, though perhaps it's just accidental, like the occasional resemblance to Herman Knight that I have traced in his features. But he's here. Maybe he would like to speak for himself."

Morton rose to his feet.

"My friends, if you will allow me, ah, to wead yaw a lettah just received, it may, ah, explain."

"Read a dozen, if they will illuminate the darkness in which, I confess, we are all groping."

Thus encouraged, Mr. Morton began:

"NEW YORK, Sept. 23, 18—.

"MY DEAR BOY:—

"If you are still living and unperforated, we will consider that foolish bet as won; and you must come home as fast as steam can carry you. Dingman is sick, and we want you to go to Russia in his place. There are some millions at stake, as you will remember, and your share of the spoils will be something handsome."

"In haste, your affectionate father."

"That suggests the explanation," began Morton, as he folded up the letter.

"I don't know that I looked so much different from other young men, but father, as an original 'forty-niner, is in the habit of cramming the West down every available throat, and on numerous occasions crammed it down mine, rallying me about my effeminate appearance, and telling me that they shot such men as I looked to be on sight. He used the word 'bet' in one instance, and I said, 'Make it twenty thousand and I'll prove that a New York dude can wear a high hat, a cane, and a boiled shirt, and agonize from Denver to the Gulf of California.'"

"He never backs down, and with ten thousand in my pocket for expenses I started for Denver. I spent the greater part of the ten thousand there, and have got thus far on my pilgrimage. If I have ever given myself away, I am not aware of it. Now I've had my fun I go back to business. I can't say that I like the idea of Russia very well, just at this time; but if I could pick my company, there might be honor, profit and pleasure in the trip. I'll ask your advice on the way East, Mr. Graunt, and perhaps Miss Selka will have a word or so to say. Ground Hog did not seem a very promising field, perhaps Russia is the corollary of the Gulch proposition. Who knows?"

So the dude, having transformed himself into a young man of business, sat down, and shortly thereafter the meeting adjourned.

It is scarcely worth while to follow the travelers East; the average prophet can see what happened after they got there.

Morton had not saved Selka's life several times for nothing. His suit was successful, they were married with a flourish, and went to Russia on their wedding tour. That they were happy goes without saying.

Elsie went with them. She will always be a little strange—at times she feels a thrill when she looks at Morton and sees once more the traces of the strange resemblance to Herman Knight. Nevertheless, she is happier now than any time since the night when she saw her husband go down in the red work at Horton Graunt's house.

It was some time before Morton could altogether drop his special vocabulary, or forget the peculiar ways he had for a time assumed. To tell the truth, when he was at college he was naturally a bit of a dude. It was in those days that Knight, who had at times assumed the name of his foe, met him. Otherwise he might have been more suspicious when the two swung together on the stage for Bumble's Bar.

Jean vibrates between New York and the wilderness. With Selka provided for, the great object of his life was accomplished, yet he continues to find life worth the living.

The lieutenant of the Hair-pins—who had taken Morton in hand to allow the chief to personate Graunt—gathered together the fragments of the band, and, after a comparatively prosperous season, departed this life after the fashion of most men of his stamp.

Up to last accounts Sands had not been heard from; and of any others mentioned in these pages it is not necessary to speak. They are important only because they saw more or less of the big game at Ground Hog.

THE END.

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229 Captain Cutsleeve; or, The Little Sport.
268 Magic Mike, the Man of Frills.
300 A Sport in Spectacles; or, The Bad Time at Bunco.
333 Derringer Dick, the Man with the Drop.
344 Double Shot Dave of the Left Hand.
356 Three Handsome Sports; or, The Double Combination.
375 Royal George, the Three in One.
396 The Piper Detective.
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200 The Rifle Rangers; or, Adventures in Mexico.
208 The White Chief. A Romance of Northern Mexico.
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108 The Duke of Diamonds.
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132 Nemo, King of the Tramps.
159 Red Rudiger, the Archer.
174 The Phantom Knights.
187 The Death's Head Outrassiers.
193 The Man in Red.
208 One Eye, the Cannoneer.
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417 Tucson Tom; or, The Fire Trailers.

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- 390 The Giant Cupid; or, Cibuta John's Jubilee.
422 Blue Grass Burt, the Gold Star Detective.
436 Kentucky Jean, the Sport from Yellow Pine.
452 Rainbow Rob, the Tulip from Texas.
473 Gilbert of Gotham, the Steel-arm Detective.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON.

- 176 Lady Jaguar, the Robber Queen.
194 Don Sombro, the California Road Gent.
202 Cactus Jack, the Giant Guide.
219 The Scorpion Brothers; or, Mad Tom's Mission.
223 Canyon Dave, the Man of the Mountain.
227 Buckshot Ben, the Man-Hunter of Idaho.
237 Long-Haired Max; or, The Black League.
245 Barranca Bill, the Revolver Champion.
258 Bullet Head, the Colorado Bravo.
263 Iron-Armed Abe, the Hunchback Destroyer.
266 Leopard Luke, the King of Horse-Thieves.
271 Stonefist, of Big Nugget Bend.
276 Texa; Chick, the Southwest Detective.
285 Lightning Bolt, the Canyon Terror.
291 Horseshoe Hank, the Man of Big Luck.
305 Silver-Plated Sol, the Montana Rover.
311 Heavy Hand; or, The Marked Men.
323 Hotspur Hugh; or, The Banded Brothers.

BY SAM S. HALL—"Buckskin Sam."

- 3 Kit Carson, Jr., the Crack Shot.
90 Wild Will, the Mad Ranchero.
178 Dark Dashwood, the Desperate.
186 The Black Bravo; or, The Tonkaway's Triumph.
191 The Terrible Tonkaway; or, Old Rocky and his Pards.
195 The Lone Star Gambler; or, The Magnolias Maid.
199 Diamond Dick, the Dandy from Denver.
204 Big Foot Wallace, the King of the Lariat.
212 The Brazos Tigers; or, The Minute Men.
217 The Serpent of El Paso; or, Frontier Frank.
221 Desperate Duke, the Guadalupe "Galoot."
225 Rocky Mountain Al; or, The Waif of the Range.
239 The Terrible Trio; or, The Angel of the Army.
244 Merciless Mart, the Man Tiger of Missouri.
250 The Rough Riders; or, Sharp Eye the Scourge.
256 Double Dan the Dastard; or, The Pirates.
264 The Crooked Three.
269 The Bayou Bravo; or, The Terrible Trail.
273 Mountain Mose, the Gorge Outlaw.
282 The Merciless Marauders; or, Carl's Revenge.
287 Dandy Dave and his Horse, White Stocking.
293 Stampede Steve; or, The Doom of the Double Face.
301 Bowlder Bill; or, The Man from Taos.
309 Raybold, the Rattling Ranger.
322 The Crimson Coyotes; or, Nita the Nemesis.
328 King Kent; or, The Bandits of the Bason.
342 Blanco Bill, the Mustang Monarch.
358 The Prince of Pan Out.
371 Gold Buttons; or, The Up Range Pards.

BY DR. J. H. ROBINSON.

- 13 Pathaway; or, Nick Whiffles, the old Nor'west Trapper.
17 Nightshade; or, The Robber Prince.
22 Whitelaw; or, Nattie of the Lake Shore.
37 Hirl, the Hunchback; or, The Santee Sword-maker.
53 Silver Knife; or, The Rocky Mountain Ranger.
70 Hyderabad, the Strangler.
73 The Knights of the Red Cross; or, The Granada Magician.
163 Ben Brion; or, Redpath, the Avenger.

BY MAJOR DANGERFIELD BURR.

- 93 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.
117 Dashing Dandy; or, The Hotspur of the Hills.
142 Captain Crimson, the Man of the Iron Face.
156 Velvet Face, the Border Bravo.
175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress.
188 The Phantom Mazeppa; or, The Hyena.
448 Hark Kenton, the Traitor.

BY MAJOR DANIEL BOONE DUMONT.

- 383 Silver Sam, the Detective.
389 Colonel Double-Edge, the Cattle Baron's Pard.
411 The White Crook; or, Old Hark's Fortress.
420 The Old River Sport; or, A Man of Honor.
439 Salamander Sam.
454 The Night Raider.
464 Sandycraw the Man of Grit.

BY GEORGE C. JENKS.

- 393 Sleepless Eye, the Pacific Detective.
432 The Giant Horseman.

BY COLONEL DELLE SARA.

- 53 Silver Sam; or, The Mystery of Deadwood City.
87 The Scarlet Captain; or, Prisoner of the Tower.
106 Shamus O'Brien, the Bould Boy of Glingal.

BY PROF. J. H. INGRAHAM.

- 113 The Sea Skipper; or, The Freebooters.
118 The Burglar Captain; or, The Fallen Star.
314 Lafitte; or, The Pirate of the Gulf.
316 Lafitte's Lieutenant; or, Child of the Sea.

BY NEWTON M. CURTISS.

- 120 The Texan Spy; or, The Prairie Guide.
254 Giant Jake, the Patrol of the Mountain.

BY FRANCIS JOHNSON.

- 25 The Gold Guide; or, Steel Arm, Regulator.
26 The Death Track; or, The Mountain Outlaws.
123 Alapaha the Squaw; or, The Border Renegades.
124 Assowaum the Avenger; or, The Doom of the Destroyer.
135 The Bush Ranger; or, The Half-Breed Rajah.
136 The Outlaw Hunter; or, The Bush Ranger.
138 The Border Bandit; or, The Horse Thief's Trail.

BY C. DUNNING CLARK.

- 164 The King's Fool.
183 Gilbert the Guide.

BY COL. THOMAS H. MONSTERY.

- 82 Iron Wrist, the Swordmaster.
126 The Demon Duelist; or, The League of Steel.
143 The Czar's Spy; or, The Nihilist League.
150 El Rubio Bravo, King of the Swordsmen.
157 Mourad, the Mameluke; or, The Three Swordmasters.
169 Corporal Cannon, the Man of Forty Duels.
236 Champion Sam; or, The Monarchs of the Show.
262 Fighting Tom, the Terror of the Toughs.
332 Spring-Heel Jack; or, The Masked Mystery.

BY ISAAC HAWKS, Ex-Detective.

- 232 Orson Oxx; or, The River Mystery.
240 A Cool Head; or, Orson Oxx in Peril.

BY GUSTAVE AIMARD.

- 15 The Tiger Slayer; or, Eagle Heart to the Rescue.
19 Red Cedar, the Prairie Outlaw.
20 The Bandit at Bay; or, The Prairie Pirates.
21 The Trapper's Daughter; or, The Outlaw's Fate.
24 Prairie Flower.
62 Loyal Heart; or, The Trappers of Arkansas.
149 The Border Rifles. A Tale of the Texan War.
151 The Freebooters. A Story of the Texan War.
153 The White Scalper.

BY NED BUNTLIN.

- 14 Thayendanegea, the Scourge; or, The War-Eagle.
16 The White Wizard; or, The Seminole Prophet.
18 The Sea Bandit; or, The Queen of the Isle.
23 The Red Warrior; or, The Comanche Lover.
61 Captain Seawall, the Privateer.
111 The Smuggler Captain; or, The Skipper's Crime.
122 Saul Sabberday, the Idiot Spy.
270 Andros the Rover; or, The Pirate's Daughter.
361 Tombstone Dick, the Train Pilot.

MISCELLANEOUS.

- 6 Wildcat Bob, the Boss Bruiser. By Edward L. Wheeler.
9 Handy Andy. By Samuel Lover.
10 Vidocq, the French Police Spy. Written by himself.
11 Midshipman Easy. By Captain Maryatt.
32 B'hoys of Yale; or, The Scrapes of Collegians.
60 Wide Awake, the Robber King. By Frank D. Mont.
68 The Fighting Trapper. By Captain J. F. O. Adams.
76 The Queen's Musketeers. By George Albany.
78 The Mysterious Spy. By Arthur M. Grainger.
102 The Masked Band; or, The Man without a Name. By George L. Aiken.
110 The Silent Rifleman. By H. W. Herbert.
125 The Blacksmith Outlaw; or, Merrie England. By Harrison Ainsworth.
133 Rody the Rover. By William Carleton.
140 The Three Spaniards. By Geo. Walker.
144 The Hunchback of Notre Dame. By Victor Hugo.
146 The Doctor Detective. By George Lemuel.
152 Captain Ironnove, the Counterfeiter Chief.
158 The Doomed Dozen. By Dr. Frank Powell.
166 Owlet, the Robber Prince. By Septimus R. Urban.
179 Conrad, the Convict. By Prof. Gildersleeve.
190 The Three Guardsmen. By Alexander Dumas.
261 Black Sam, the Prairie Thunderbolt. By Col. Jo Yards.
275 The Smuggler Cutter; or, The Cavern in the Cliff. By J. D. Conroy.
312 Kinkfoot Karl, the Mountain Scourge. By Morris Redwing.
330 Cop Colt, the Quaker City Detective. By Charles Morris.
350 Flash Falcon, the Society Detective. By Weldon J. Cobb.
353 Bart Brennan; or, The King of Straight Flush. By John Outhbert.
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- 2 The Dare Devil; or, The Winged Sea Witch.
- 85 The Cretan Rover; or, Zuleikah the Beautiful.
- 89 The Pirate Prince; or, The Queen of the Isle.
- 94 Freelance, the Buccaneer.
- 103 Merle, the Mutineer; or, The Red Anchor Brand.
- 104 Montezuma, the Merciless.
- 109 Captain Kyd, the King of the Black Flag.
- 116 Black Plume; or, The Sorceress of Hell Gate.
- 121 The Sea Cadet; or, The Rover of the Rigoletts.
- 128 The Chevalier Corsair; or, The Heritage.
- 131 Buckskin Sam, the Texas Trapper.
- 134 Darkey Dan, the Colored Detective.
- 139 Fire Eye; or, The Bride of a Buccaneer.
- 147 Gold Spur, the Gentleman from Texas.
- 155 The Corsair Queen; or, The Gypsies of the Sea.
- 162 The Mad Mariner; or, Dishonored and Disowned.
- 168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.
- 172 Black Pirate; or, The Golden Fetters Mystery.
- 177 Don Diablo, the Planter-Corsair.
- 181 The Scarlet Schooner; or, The Sea Nemesis.
- 184 The Ocean Vampire; or, The Castle Heiress.
- 189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperate Dozen.
- 198 The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer.
- 205 The Gambler Pirate; or, Lady of the Lagoon.
- 210 Buccaneer Bess, the Lioness of the Sea.
- 216 The Corsair Planter; or, Driven to Doom.
- 220 The Specter Yacht; or, A Brother's Crime.
- 224 Black Beard, the Buccaneer.
- 231 The Kid Glove Miner; or, The Magic Doctor.
- 235 Red Lightning the Man of Chance.
- 246 Queen Helen, the Amazon of the Overland.
- 255 The Pirate Priest; or, The Gambler's Daughter.
- 259 Outlaw and Cross; or, The Ghouls of the Sea.
- 261 The Sea Owl; or, The Lady Captain of the Gulf.
- 307 The Phantom Pirate; or, The Water Wolves.
- 318 The Indian Buccaneer; or, The Red Rovers.
- 325 The Gentleman Pirate; or, The Casco Hermits.
- 329 The League of Three; or, Buffalo Bill's Pledge.
- 336 The Magic Ship; or, Sandy Hook Freebooters.
- 341 The Sea Desperado.
- 346 Ocean Guerrillas; or, Phantom Midshipman.
- 362 Buffalo Bill's Grip; or, Oath Bound to Custer.
- 364 The Sea Fugitive; or, The Queen of the Coast.
- 369 The Coast Corsair; or, The Siren of the Sea.
- 373 Sailor of Fortune; or, The Barnegat Buccaneer.
- 377 Afloat and Ashore; or, The Corsair Conspirator.
- 388 The Giant Buccaneer; or, The Wrecker Witch.
- 393 The Convict Captain.
- 399 The New Monte Cristo.
- 418 The Sea Siren; or, The Fugitive Privateer.
- 425 The Sea Sword; or, The Ocean Rivals.
- 430 The Fatal Frigate; or, Rivals in Love and War.
- 435 The One-Armed Buccaneer.
- 446 Ocean Ogre, the Outcast Corsair.
- 457 The Sea Insurgent.
- 469 The Lieutenant Detective.
- 476 Bob Brent, the Buccaneer.
- 482 Ocean Tramps.

BY WILLIAM H. MANNING.

- 279 The Gold Dragoon, or, The California Bloodhound.
- 297 Colorado Rube, the Strong Arm of Hotspur.
- 385 Wild Dick Turpin, the Leadville Lion.
- 405 Old Baldy, the Brigadier of Buck Basin.
- 415 Hot Heart, the Detective Spy.
- 427 The Rivals of Montana Mill.
- 437 Deep Duke; or, The Man of Two Lives.
- 442 Wild West Walt, the Mountain Veteran.
- 449 Bluff Burke, King of the Rockies.
- 455 Yank Yellowbird, the Tall Hustler of the Hills.
- 463 Gold Gauntlet, the Gulch Gladiator.
- 470 The Duke of Dakota.
- 479 Gladiator Gabe, the Samson of Sassa Jack.
- 486 Kansas Kitten, the Northwest Detective.

BY EDWARD WILLETT.

- 129 Mississippi Mose; or, a Strong Man's Sacrifice.
- 209 Buck Farley, the Bonanza Prince.
- 222 Bill the Blizzard; or, Red Jack's Crime.
- 248 Montana Nat, the Lion of Last Chance Camp.
- 274 Flush Fred, the Mississippi Sport.
- 289 Flush Fred's Full Hand.
- 298 Logger Lem; or, Life in the Pine Woods.
- 308 Hemlock Hank, Tough and True.
- 315 Flush Fred's Double; or, The Squatters' League.
- 327 Terrapin Dick, the Wildwood Detective.
- 337 Old Gabe, the Mountain Tramp.
- 348 Dan Dillon, King of Crosscut.
- 368 The Canyon King; or, a Price on his Head.
- 483 Flush Fred, the River Sharp.

BY JACKSON KNOX—"Old Hawk."

- 336 Hawk Heron, the Falcon Detective.
- 424 Hawk Heron's Deputy.
- 444 The Magic Detective; or, The Hidden Hand.
- 451 Griplock, the Rocket Detective.
- 462 The Circus Detective.
- 467 Mainwaring, the Salamander.
- 477 Dead-arm Brandt.
- 485 Rowlock, the Harbor Detective.

BY BUFFALO BILL (Hon. W. F. Cody).

- 52 Death-Trailer, the Chief of Scouts.
- 83 Gold Bullet Sport; or, Knights of the Overland.
- 243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.
- 304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.
- 319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.
- 394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.
- 397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White Beaver's Trail.
- 401 One-Armed Pard; or, Borderland Retribution.
- 414 Red Renard, the Indian Detective.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.

- 28 Three-Fingered Jack, the Road-Agent.
- 30 Gospel George; or, Fiery Fred, the Outlaw.
- 40 Long-Haired Pards; or, The Tartars of the Plains.
- 45 Old Bull's-Eye, the Lightning Shot.
- 47 Pacific Pete, the Prince of the Revolver.
- 50 Jack Rabbit, the Prairie Sport.
- 64 Double-Sight, the Death Shot.
- 67 The Boy Jockey; or, Honesty vs. Crookedness.
- 71 Captain Cool Blade; or, Mississippi Man Shark.
- 88 Big George; or, The Five Outlaw Brothers.
- 105 Dan Brown of Denver; or, The Detective.
- 119 Alabama Joe; or, The Yazoo Man-Hunters.
- 127 Sol Scott, the Masked Miner.
- 141 Equinox Tom, the Bully of Red Rock.
- 154 Joaquin, the Saddle King.
- 165 Joaquin, the Terrible.
- 170 Sweet William, the Trapper Detective.
- 180 Old '49; or, The Amazon of Arizona.
- 197 Revolver Rob; or, The Belle of Nugget Camp.
- 201 Pirate of the Placers; or, Joaquin's Death Hunt.
- 233 The Old Boy of Tombstone.
- 241 Spitfire Saul, King of the Rustlers.
- 249 Elephant Tom, of Durango.
- 257 Death Trap Diggings; or, A Hard Man from 'Way Back.

- 283 Sleek Sam, the Devil of the Mines.
- 286 Pistol Johnny; or, One Man in a Thousand.
- 292 Moke Horner, the Boss Roustabout.
- 302 Faro Saul, the Handsome Hercules.
- 317 Frank Lightfoot, the Miner Detective.
- 324 Old Forked Lightning, the Solitary.
- 331 Chispa Charley, the Gold Nugget Sport.
- 339 Spread Eagle Sam, the Hercules Hide Hunter.
- 345 Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective.
- 351 Nor' West Nick, the Border Detective.
- 355 Stormy Steve, the Mad Athlete.
- 360 Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown.
- 367 A Royal Flush; or, Dan Brown's Big Game.
- 372 Captain Crisp, the Man with a Record.
- 379 Howling Jonathan, the Terror from Headwaters.
- 387 Dark Durg, the Ishmael of the Hills.
- 395 Deadly Aim, the Duke of Derringers.
- 403 The Nameless Sport.
- 409 Rob Roy Ranch; or, The Imps of Pan Handle.
- 416 Monte Jim, the Black Sheep of Bismarck.
- 426 The Ghost Detective; or, The Spy of the Secret Service.
- 433 Laughing Leo; or, Sam's Dandy Pard.
- 438 Oklahoma Nick.
- 443 A Cool Hand; or, Pistol Johnny's Picnic.
- 450 The Rustler Detective.
- 458 Dutch Dan, the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg.
- 466 Old Rough and Ready, the Sage of Sundown.
- 474 Daddy Dead-Eye, the Despot of Dew Drop.
- 488 The Thoroughbred Sport.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES.

- 278 Hercules Goldspur, the Man of the Velvet Band.
- 294 Broadcloth Burt, the Denver Dandy.
- 321 California Claude, the Lone Bandit.
- 335 Flash Dan, the Nabob; or, Blades of Bowie Bar.
- 340 Cool Conrad, the Dakota Detective.
- 347 Denver Duke, the Man with "Sand."
- 352 The Desperate Dozen.
- 365 Keen Kennard, the Shasta Shadow.
- 374 Major Blister, the Sport of Two Cities.
- 382 The Bonanza Band; or, Dread Don of Cool Clan.
- 392 The Lost Bonanza; or, The Boot of Silent Hound.
- 400 Captain Coldgrip; or, The New York Spotter.
- 407 Captain Coldgrip's Nerve; or, Injun Nick.
- 413 Captain Coldgrip in New York.
- 421 Father Ferret, the Frisco Shadow.
- 434 Lucifer Lynx, the Wonder Detective.
- 441 The California Sharp.
- 447 Volcano, the Frisco Spy.
- 453 Captain Coldgrip's Long Trail.
- 460 Captain Coldgrip, the Detective.
- 468 Coldgrip in Deadwood.
- 480 Hawkspear, the Man with a Secret.
- 487 Sunshine Sam, a Chip of the Old Block.

BY LEON LEWIS.

- 428 The Flying Glim; or, The Island Lure.
- 456 The Demon Steer.
- 481 The Silent Detective; or, The Bogus Nephew.
- 484 Captain Ready, the Red Ransomer.

BY PERCY B. ST. JOHN.

- 57 The Silent Hunter.
- 86 The Big Hunter; or, The Queen of the Woods.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE.

- 1 A Hard Crowd; or, Gentleman Sam's Sister.
- 4 The Kidnapper; or, The Northwest Shanghai.
- 29 Tiger Dick, Faro King; or, The Cashier's Crime.
- 54 Always on Hand; or, The Foot-Hills Sport.
- 80 A Man of Nerve; or, Caliban the Dwarf.
- 114 The Gentleman from Pike.
- 171 Tiger Dick, the Man of the Iron Heart.
- 207 Old Hard Head; or, Whirlwind and his Mare.
- 251 Tiger Dick vs. Iron Despard.
- 280 Tiger Dick's Lone Hand.
- 299 Three of a Kind; or, Tiger Dick, Iron Despard and the Sportive Sport.
- 338 Jack Sands, the Boss of the Town.
- 359 Yellow Jack, the Mestizo.
- 380 Tiger Dick's Pledge; or, The Golden Serpent.
- 404 Silver Sid; or, A "Daisy" Bluff.
- 431 California Kit, the Always on Hand.
- 472 Six Foot Si; or, The Man to "Tie To."

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN.

- 27 The Spotter Detective; or, Girls of New York.
- 31 The New York Sharp; or, The Flash of Lightning.
- 33 Overland Kit; or, The Idyl of White Pine.
- 34 Rocky Mountain Rob, the California Outlaw.
- 35 Kentucky, the Sport; or, Dick Talbot of the Mines.
- 36 Injun Dick; or, The Death-Shot of Shasta.
- 38 Velvet Hand; or, Injun Dick's Iron Grip.
- 41 Gold Dan; or, The White Savage of Salt Lake.
- 42 The California Detective; or, The Witches of N. Y.
- 49 The Wolf Demon; or, The Kanawha Queen.
- 56 The Indian Mazepa; or, Madman of the Plains.
- 59 The Man from Texas; or, The Arkansas Outlaw.
- 63 The Winged Whale; or, The Red Rupert of Gulf.
- 72 The Phantom Hand; or, The 5th Avenue Heiress.
- 75 Gentleman George; or, Parlor, Prison and Street.
- 77 The Fresh of Frisco; or, The Heiress.
- 79 Joe Phenix, the Police Spy.
- 81 The Human Tiger; or, A Heart of Fire.
- 84 Hunted Down; or, The League of Three.
- 91 The Winning Oar; or, The Innkeeper's Daughter.
- 93 Captain Dick Talbot, King of the Road.
- 97 Bronze Jack, the California Thoroughbred.
- 101 The Man from New York.
- 107 Richard Talbot, of Cinnabar.
- 112 Joe Phenix, Private Detective.
- 130 Captain Volcano; or, The Man of Red Revolvers.
- 161 The Wolves of New York; or, Joe Phenix's Hunt.
- 173 California John, the Pacific Thoroughbred.
- 196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen.
- 203 The Double Detective; or, The Midnight Mystery.
- 252 The Wall Street Blood; or, The Telegraph Girl.
- 320 The Genteel Spotter; or, The N. Y. Night Hawk.
- 349 Iron-Hearted Dick, the Gentleman Road-Agent.
- 354 Red Richard; or, The Crimson Cross Brand.
- 363 Crowningshield, the Detective.
- 370 The Dusky Detective; or, Pursued to the End.
- 376 Black Beards; or, The Rio Grande High Horse.
- 381 The Gypsy Gentleman; or, Nick Fox, Detective.
- 384 Injun Dick, Detective; or, Tracked to New York.
- 391 Kate Scott, the Decoy Detective.
- 408 Doc Grip, the Vendetta of Death.
- 419 The Bat of the Battery; or, Joe Phenix, Detective.
- 423 The Lone Hand; or, The Red River Recreants.
- 440 The High Horse of the Pacific.
- 461 The Fresh on the Rio Grande.
- 465 The Actor Detective.
- 475 Chin Chin, the Chinese Detective.

LATEST AND NEW ISSUES.

- 489 The Pirate Hunter. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.
- 490 The Lone Hand in Texas. By Albert W. Aiken.
- 491 Zigzag and Cutt, the Invincible Detectives. By E. A. St. Mox.
- 492 Border Bullet, the Prairie Sharpshooter. By Wm. H. Manning.
- 493 The Scouts of the Sea. By Col. P. Ingraham.
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- 496 Richard Redfire, the Two Worlds' Detective. By Capt. Howard Holmes.
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